Theocratic Education: Understanding the Islamic Republic of Iran by Analyzing Its Textbooks

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Abstract

On February 11, 1979, the monarchy rule in Iran was replaced by an Islamic theocracy, and the new government revised textbooks to promote a new identity based on Shia Islam and the Iranian nationalism. Because textbooks are used throughout the world to create national identities and are of interest to educators, an analysis of texts can provide insights into how a nation views itself, others, and its place in the world. Using discourse analysis, this study analyzes an eighth-grade history textbook used in the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2004 to understand the role of Khomeini vis-à-vis the Shah and how the regime’s adversaries are depicted. Concepts of grievance and framing are used to analyze the textbook.

History Textbooks Are Political

School history textbooks provide evidence for how a nation constructs national memories and how they present collective symbols that help create “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) that are used to socialize the young. What history textbooks reveal or omit matters. Apple (2000) argues that teachers should understand the ideological content of textbooks so that they can “create an education worthy of its name” (p. 39).

Before discussing the textbook of the Islamic Republic of Iran, two cases from Iraq and post-war Spain in 1939 provide a context to locate this study within other textbook studies that reveal the “relationship between education and power” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 2). The Iraqi case is used because it highlights government censorship of textbooks and an unwillingness to acknowledge certain aspects of the Iraqi history. Although from earlier era, the example of 1939 post-war Spain illustrates how textbooks have been used as a tool of indoctrination to establish a new society.
The Case of Iraq

In May 2003, the U.S.-led administration in Iraq abolished the Ba’ath party and efforts continued to build a new regime. About 5,500,000 Iraqi schoolchildren were provided with new textbooks that had no reference to Saddam or the Ba’ath party. These textbooks were also void of controversies. Asquith (2003) reports, “Some 563 texts were heavily edited and revised over the summer by a team of U.S.-appointed Iraqi educators” (p. 8). Why? Because U.S. officials [did] not want to fund “textbooks that are anti-semitic, anti-American, or radically religious...” (p. 8). Textbooks during the Saddam’s rule erroneously claimed, “Iraq won both the Iran-Iraq war and the 1991 Gulf War,” and after the collapse of his regime, “references to America, Shias and Sunnis, Kurds, Kuwaitis, Jews, and Iranians” (Asquith, 2003, p. 8) were omitted. Eisner (2002) refers to such a phenomenon as “the null curriculum” (p. 97). What will be said about the emerging new Iraq remains an open question. What is clear is the history has been rewritten. The next case is about Spain under Franco’s fascist rule and how textbooks were used as a tool of indoctrination.

The Case of Spain 1939

Pinto (2004) examined the indoctrination of the youth of post-war Spain in 1939. Pinto deployed Bakhtin’s authoritative discourse to analyze a fascist civics textbook. Such a discourse relies on authority and is connected to a culturally familiar knowledge base. Francisco Franco’s fascist indoctrination was introduced in elementary schools and relied on control, persuasion, and manipulation to achieve its goals. The ideology was, “...control the political discourse by promoting the cult of personality surrounding the Caudillo, military strength, unity of Spain, the greatness of the fatherland, and the deep-rooted traditional values of Catholicism, family, and order” (p. 650). A vision of a new idealized world was promoted where “Caudillo was a superior human being” (p. 662). Slogans were used as a form of control and promotion of certain values. Eisner (2002) refers to such a phenomenon as the explicit curriculum where children are taught “to read and write, to figure, and to learn something about the history of the country” (p. 87).

In summary, these two cases show the influence of official state control over the published school textbooks in times of political transition. In the case of Iraq, education is framed in neutral terms by eliminating all controversies from textbooks. Here, teaching of history is more than teaching facts about disputed past; it is really about creating a “collective memory” (Wertsch, 2002, p. 70). In Spain, the ideology of Franco fascism is methodically implemented in schools, and textbooks reflect it. History textbooks in the Islamic Republic of Iran reveal a set of new values built around Khomeini and religious opposition to the Shah. Let us begin by understanding why there was a revolution in Iran in 1979.

The Case of Iran

Iran’s history took a turn from democracy in August of 1953 when the “Operation Ajax” (Kinzer, 2003, p. 6) succeeded in replacing Dr. Mosadegh’s government with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The U.S. and British intelligence services succeeded in overthrowing the legitimate government of Iran in 1953. According to the declassified CIA documents published by New York Times, their aims included securing access to Iran’s oil and preventing Iran from becoming...
a Soviet satellite state (Risen, 2000). What may have seemed to be a good policy at the time has contributed to a breakdown of direct diplomatic relations and mistrust of intentions between Iran and the United States today. Many Iranians considered the Shah to be a crony of the West and a puppet of the United States in the Persian Gulf area. But these are not reasons enough to explain why he lost the Peacock Throne on February 11, 1979. There are several hypotheses that try to explain why the Shah’s regime collapsed which include the role of the traditional merchants in Iran supporting the opposition (Helms, 1981); intelligentsia’s opposition to the Shah’s authoritarian rule (Halliday, 1979), and hostility between the Shah and Khomeini (Hoveyda, 1979) and several others. The Shah, in his book, *Answer to History*, contends that alliance between the “religious fanatics” (Pahlavi, 1980, p. 145) on the right and the communists on the left led to the collapse of his regime. He asserts, “The media, the major oil companies, and the British and American governments were the other ingredients in this strange amalgam” (p. 145). Shawcross (1988) argues, “The Americans became a catalyst for the revolution” (p. 176). The massive oil revenue gave the Shah an unprecedented buying power to purchase whatever arms he wanted from the United States.

By 1964, the Shah’s regime granted extralegal rights to the American military stationed in Iran. Khomeini opposed this policy and a religious opposition was crystallized. By 1977 thousands of American civilians and military personnel were working in Iran. The influx of so many Americans who were unaware of the “intricacies of the Shite faith” led to social tensions between the local Iranians and the American workers. For example, Iranians found it offensive that Americans held parties with loud music during religious holidays of mourning (Shawcross, 1988, p.177). Such lack of sensitivity by the Americans toward the local customs and traditions did not help the situation.

Between 1957-1979, the United States helped Iran develop its first nuclear program. In 1974, Iran and the United States signed a broad trade agreement that included as follows:

…the purchase of eight reactors valued at $6.4 billion. The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission agrees to supply Iran with fuel for two 1,200MWe light water reactors and signs a provisional agreement to supply fuel for as many as six additional reactors with a total power capacity of 8,000MWe. (Jahanpour, 2006)

This nuclear pact has lead to tensions between two former allies. For example, the current Bush administration claims that the Islamic Republic of Iran’s nuclear program is for producing nuclear bombs while Ahamdinejad’s government argues that it is for producing electricity (Dareini, 2006). This past history of political upheaval and dissolving of former partnerships has created tensions among policy makers and continues to have implications for educators as what history to teach.

*New Regime, New Discourse*

Prior to the fall of the Shah, massive street demonstrations in Tehran were common. I witnessed the chanting of “Neither East, Nor West! Islamic Republic!” from thousands of protesters who packed the streets of Tehran. This slogan represented a vision for Iran as an Islamic state, independent from the left and the right-wing inspired ideologies. Another popular slogan of the time was “Unity, Struggle, Victory!” The idea was for all opposition groups to set aside their differences and work toward the common goal of deposing the Shah. What followed after the “Victory” was the silencing of voices of dissent and crushing of all opposition groups through imprisonments, executions, censorships, and other oppressive tactics used by the regime.
Khomeini’s Islamic hegemony changed the face of Iran. For example, all women were required to wear veils, and society’s public spaces became segregated by gender. During the war with Iraq, local mosques became centers for distribution of food rations and recruitments. Discrimination based on religion became a norm. Non-Muslims were welcomed to convert to Islam, but Muslims were forbidden to convert to other religions and could expect to be killed if they did so. Also, if a non-Muslim converted to Islam, he could inherit all of his family’s property and wealth and could deprive his or her siblings of their share of inheritance.

Iranians were experiencing a unique form of political re-education based on Shia Islam. This process included “conscious measures for re-education, from re-writing of history textbooks to exchange programs and official re-definition of collective identity” (Adam, 2000, p. 100). Thus, a steady transformation of a secular Iran into an Islamic theocracy was taking shape.

A new identity rooted in Islamic values and traditions was imposed on the population. Under supervision of the new Islamic Republic, textbooks were rewritten and a new ideology based on a mixture of Shia Islam and Iranian nationalism shaped the school curriculum. The curriculum, centrally planned and using standardized textbooks, was used throughout the country. The textbook became the authority on Iran’s new history and can serve as a valuable artifact of selected cultural values and provide narratives about how this theocratic regime in Iran views itself and the world.

Research Questions

Iran during the Shah was a country where opportunities for political expressions were limited and mosques became centers of opposition to his rule. Khomeini became the prominent religious leader opposing the Shah. His faxes and audio-recorded messages from exile in France were distributed in Iran. When the Shah’s regime fell, Khomeini became the iconic figure and the spiritual leader of the new regime.

Two questions ground this research analysis: (1) What is the portrayal of Khomeini vis-à-vis the Shah? (2) How does the textbook depict the enemies of the Islamic Republic? This paper provides much needed insight into the values of an influential theocratic regime in the Middle East that the US considers dangerous and plans to possibly fight. Given the current political climate in the United States, it is not surprising to read that Iraq and Iran are “among America’s most urgent challenges” (Weymouth, 2006, p. 31). The U.S. Congress, under the bills HR 4939 and HR 5122, is funding programs to “foster democratic ideals in Iran” and prepare for possible military confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Christian, 2006). Lenses of discourse analysis and sociological concepts of grievance and framing are deployed to provide insight into how a political regime is attempting to socialize its youth. I will elaborate on these concepts and show how they are used in this research.

Conceptual Framework

Language is more than a means of communication. Language defines, supports, and directs organized human activities. Gee (1999) refers to “Discourse analysis” as “a reciprocal and cyclical process in which we shuttle back and forth between the structure (form, design) of a piece of language and the situated meanings it is attempting to build about the world, identities, and relationships” (p. 99). In this process, accepted forms of knowledge and the nature and boundaries of the political and public sphere can be revealed too.
The central idea here is that effective language use happens when others recognize and understand the values, symbols, places, and other things associated with that discourse. For example, discourse analysis can highlight the subtleties of the Persian language and the way information is presented in the eighth grade history textbook. There are several ways to say “you” in Persian. One can say شما “shomaa” or تو “tow.” The first word is formal and polite “you,” and the latter is informal, depending on the context; “tow” can be considered a rude way of addressing someone or a casual way of calling on a dear friend. Khomeini made use of both concepts as he addressed the Shah of Iran. The broader discourse structure is about ideology and power relations in the Iranian society.

I examined the research questions through the lenses of grievance and framing from the social movement theory. Grievance is defined: “the issue (or issues) around which a social movement develops. Grievance stems from a shared perception that a group of individuals is being denied rights, opportunities, proper respect, safety, or some other form of social good…” (Reed, 2002). In this process, the “us versus them, victim versus aggressor” is established. As for definition of framing, Binder (2002) defines it:

The rhetorical activity that movement leaders use to try to connect their arguments about a set of issues to audiences’ common-sense understandings about those same issues.

When successful, movements’ framing activities result in “frame resonance,” whereby an audience “buys into” the logic of the movement. (p. 12)

Because Khomeini is the leader of the Islamic Republic, his comments are highlighted in this study. Khomeini framed the struggle in a binary fashion: the Shah, the United States, and Israel on the one side and Islam, religious leaders, and the people of Iran on the other side.

**Method**

There are many approaches to discourse analysis. However, according to Gee (1999), all approaches in discourse analysis involve asking questions about how language creates meaning in a particular setting. He suggests choosing a piece of data that is rich and relevant to the research questions and asking questions that lead to emergence of themes or ideas that can illuminate fresh insights. Thus, data chosen for this study are selected Persian texts that discuss the Shah, the United States of America, Israel, and the Islamic movement in Iran.

With the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, Iran’s national flag changed as well. The colors of green on top, white in the center, and red at the bottom were retained by the new regime. These colors stand for prosperity, peace, and valor/willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the protection of the country. During the Shah’s regime, there was a glowing sun behind a lion holding a sword in his right paw. This image was drawn from an ancient Iranian symbol of The Lion and the Sun, symbolizing powerful rule and divine blessing. Theocrats in Iran replaced the old symbol with “Allah” and put it in the center of the flag. The Arabic words of Allah Akbar (God is Great) were written 22 times on the flag to commemorate the 22nd of Bahman, the official date of the revolution. Bahman is the name for the 11th month in the Iranian calendar, and it is a Persian word, meaning Good Thoughts. In Zoroastrianism, it represents one of the attributes of Ahuraa-Mazdaa (The Great Life-Giving-Wise One). Here we see a blending of Islam with deep-rooted Iranian values that predate Islam.

I read the entire eighth-grade history textbook and made notes about the content of the lessons that related to my research questions. I looked for lessons that discussed the formation of the Islamic movement in Iran related to the 1979 Revolution, the treatment of the Pahlavi
regime, and the representation of Israel and the United States. These four areas were chosen because they were included in Khomeini’s framing of the 1979 Revolution. Next, I describe the general layout of the history textbook and how the chapters are organized.

Textbook’s Front Cover

On the front cover of this eighth-grade history textbook are five images of historical buildings and mosques. These images are geometrically arranged, similar to special calligraphy writing that reads in Arabic: Allah Akbar, meaning God is Great. These patterns are similar to the mosaic tiles of many mosques. The center image shows the iconic symbol of Tehran, formerly called, Shahyaad Square, a monument built during the Shah’s regime, as a part of the celebrations associated with 2,500 years of monarchy in Iran. After the revolution, it was renamed Freedom Square. This building was the first monument that visitors saw when leaving the Mehrabad International Airport for downtown Tehran. The Islamic Republic has tried to erase all possible signs associated with the Shah’s regime, even renaming public streets. For example, it is common to find streets named after those who died in the Iran-Iraq War or prominent religious or political figures.

On the cover of the textbook is a picture of school children gathered at the Freedom Square, raising their fists into the air. They are divided into three large groups wearing red, white, and green— the tri-colors of the national Iranian flag. Behind the last row of the students is a larger-than-life placard showing an image of a Muslim religious leader, possibly Khomeini, the spiritual guide of the Islamic Republic or Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

On the top left hand side cover of the textbook, the official emblem of the Islamic Republic of Iran is shown; it reads "Allah." This is an Arabic word meaning God. It is made up of a downright sword in the center with four crescents attached to it that make up a balanced scale, representing justice and fairness. It also resembles a tulip, which is associated with martyrdom. Below the emblem of Allah, three statements in Persian appear in the following order.
Education is framed in terms of religious and moral doctrines of Islam. Arabic words for “teaching and learning” are used despite the fact that the Persian language has synonyms for such concepts. To show the interplay between power and education, it is necessary to examine books used under the Pahlavi dynasty. We find that during the Shah’s regime, efforts were made to connect the monarchy with the glorious past that Iranians knew through poetry of Omar Khayyam, Hafiz, Sa’di, Nezami, Ferdowsi, and others. “Department of Education” was written on the front cover of textbooks followed by half a verse from the Ferdowsi’s epic of Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) that reads: *Strong are those who are wise and knowledgeable.* The new regime has framed education in Islamic terms by removing Ferdowsi’s poem.

**Inside the Book**

The first words that appear on the first page are in Arabic: “In the name of Allah, the compassionate and the merciful.” Again, the use of Arabic instead of Persian is significant because it promotes an Islamic orientation. The first image a reader sees inside the textbook is a colorful smiling image of Khomeini that covers about 80% of the page. Below his image are his words that encourage the youth to learn from history to advance the cause of Islam. Khomeini emphasizes the power of Islamic faith and Muslim unity. He demands the ultimate sacrifice from his followers. Here is my translation of his message:

We must learn from history. When we look at history [and observe the] changes that appeared in Islam and in Moslems, [we can see that] everywhere that the power of religious conviction was working, [and] people and Moslems relied upon their power of faith, victory became theirs and every time they reached for earthly desires, victory ran away from them.
Khomeini’s message promotes a culture of self-sacrifice for the perceived greater good. The mention of Islam and Moslems are prominent in textbooks and are repetitive themes throughout this history textbook as well. In addition, he uses the Arabic word for victory that has a religious underpinning. In other words, the struggle is a religious one and the victory is a religious one as well.

The dimensions of the eighth-grade history textbook are 6.5 inches by 9.25 inches. There are a mix of 70 black and white and color pictures of mostly buildings and men. In order to reference selected historical events and show chronology, a mixture of the Arabic lunar calendar, Iranian solar calendar, and Western calendar are used. This textbook has 98 pages and is divided into sixteen lessons. The following is the table of contents and the number of pages dedicated to each lesson:

- Lesson 1: The Safavids (I) (5 pages)
- Lesson 2: The Safavids (II) (9 pages)
- Lesson 3: Afshar and Zand, Two Short-lived Dynasties (8 pages)
- Lesson 4: History of Europe in Modern Times (6 pages)
- Lesson 5: Founding of the Qajar Dynasty (7 pages)
- Lesson 6: Iran During Mohammad Shah and Naser-o-din Shah (8 pages)
- Lesson 7: How and Why the Constitutional Revolution Happened? (4 pages)
- Lesson 8: Mohammad Ali Shah: The Enemy of the Constitutional Government (4 pages)
- Lesson 9: World War I and its Impact on Iran (8 pages)
- Lesson 10: End of Qajar Rule and Beginning of Reza Khan’s Rule, (4 pages)
- Lesson 11: World War II and its Impact on Iran, (4 pages)
- Lesson 12: Movement to Nationalize the Iranian Oil Industry, (4 pages)
- Lesson 13: How Did the Islamic Iranian Movement Take Shape? (8 pages)
- Lesson 14: Islamic Revolution of Iran, Part I, (5 pages)
- Lesson 15: Islamic Revolution of Iran, Part II, (7 pages)
- Lesson 16: Islamic Revolution After Victory, (7 pages)

The same topics are revisited in the eleventh-grade history textbook with more details provided to enforce the desired concepts. The last four lessons in this textbook make up 27.5% or a little over one fourth of the textbook. The World Wars I and II are briefly covered in terms of their impacts on Iran. Only twelve pages are dedicated to those Wars, which include fifteen questions at the end of the two lessons, three pages of timelines, four pages of pictures, and one map. Those Wars are framed in terms of aggressive policies of imperial powers to dominate weaker countries: (a) gaining new territories; (b) gaining access to oil; (c) competing for technology; (d) competing for greater market share, and (e) advancing their own interests at the expense of other nations.

The special message to teachers that appears in the preface section before the first lesson deserves a mention. Teachers are discouraged from filling the information gaps by providing their own supplemental materials and resources. Teachers are directed to help students achieve “an appropriate perspective” of history according to what may have already been provided in the form of textbooks and other government supplied teaching resources. Only the government-supplied resources are to be used by teachers.

Dedicating 2 of 98 pages of the textbook to color-images of Khomeini and Khamenei is evidence of how important these religious and political leaders are to the regime. Khomeini’s
image appears in the preface section of the textbook and Khamenei’s image on page 97. Khamenei is the current Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and holds the veto power in the country.

In lesson one, the establishment of the Safavid dynasty is discussed as well as how King Esmaeeel brought order to the country some 500 years ago. He established the Shia Islam as the official religion of Iran. There is no discussion about the impact of Shia Islam on the existing religious communities like Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews in Iran. Dates for key events are based on the Arabic lunar calendar, and only one hint is presented to understand the date in terms of the Iranian solar calendar. Two clear themes of Shia Islam and Iranian nationalism are promoted in this lesson and carried through the lessons.

Lesson four is only six pages and is about Europe’s history from 1500 to 1800 A.D. Religious, social, and political events of Europe are only briefly mentioned. An image of Martin Luther is presented as an important religious leader who opposed the Pope and sought to improve religious beliefs. He is presented as a progressive religious man who opposed tyranny, and his followers are referred to as Protestants. This framing of European history in terms of religion, gives legitimacy to the opposition of the Iranian religious leaders who opposed to the Shah. The themes of opposition and protest continue in subsequent lessons and are consistent with the framing of Iranians having grievances against the Shah.

Throughout the textbook, the words “Islam” and “Islamic” appear 21 times—54 times respectively. The word “Imam” appears 82 times in the lessons and the words “martyr(s)” and “martyrdom” are mentioned 26 times. In addition, other Islamic concepts are mentioned over 120 times. It is quite remarkable to see the absence of women in this textbook. There is not a single prominent female image mentioned in this textbook. The only image is that of a few black-draped women in a photo taken in front of a mosque where Khomeini is buried. This photo appears on page 96 of the textbook. The pictures of Khomeini, Khamenei, and Khomeini’s son, Ahmad are prominently displayed above the entrance to the mosque and are bigger than the images of women walking the grounds below these pictures. The obvious absence of prominent female images in this textbook is consistent with the public image of a male-dominated Islamic theocracy and the regime’s efforts to segregate society based on gender.

The eighth-grade history textbook ends on page 98 with five questions: Four out of the five questions are simple recall questions. The first question asks about the year people voted for the Islamic Republic. The second question asks for the organizations that were formed right after the Revolution. The third question asks, “In response to what event, did the students occupy the U.S. embassy?” Question four asks about what year Iraq invaded Iran. The last question asks students to think about “the most important achievements of the Revolution, ‘Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic’” and instructs them to present their ideas to class. It is highly unlikely for any dissenting voices to emerge in this line of questioning. Slogans are easy to memorize and remember. The use of slogan here is quite effective in terms of framing the Revolution of 1979 in a particular way that reminds the youth to follow suit and work to preserve the Islamic Republic that they have learned about in their textbooks.

Khomeini’s Speech

According to lesson thirteen, the Shah’s secret police (SAVAK) threatened the Muslim-religious leaders in Iran against preaching against the Shah and Israel during their sermons. Furthermore, they were told not to repeat the message of “Islam is in danger.”
In the face of those threats, Khomeini delivered a major speech, warning people about Israel’s ill intents against Islam and the country.

Khomeini is considered the spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic, and the textbook prominently features his ideas and images. By focusing on an excerpt from Khomeini’s speech, appearing on page 76 of the eighth-grade history textbook, we can gain an insight into how this regime framed the struggle against the Shah and its enemies. My translation of that text appears below.

- Line 1: If the dictatorial system of Iran wanted to fight the religious centers and was against the Islamic religious scholars/leaders,
- Line 2: then what business did it have with Koran? With Feizeeyeh [Qom’s main religious school]? With Tollaab, [students enrolled in religious studies]?
- Line 3: With the 18 year-old seiyed [descendant of the Prophet] (this is in reference to one of the young Tollaab that
- Line 4: became a martyr at the events that occurred at the Feizeeyeh school.) What had our 18 year-old seiyed had done to the Shah?
- Line 5: What had he done to the government? To the dictatorial system of Iran? We reach this conclusion that they were focused on the fundamentals,
- Line 6: They are opposing the fundamentals of Islam and spirituality; they do not want this foundation to exist.
- Line 7: They don’t want any part of us, small or large, to exist. Israel does not want in this
- Line 8: Country, Koran to exist, Israel does not want in this country, Islamic scholars to exist. Israel
- Line 9: does not want in this country Islamic Law to exist, Israel does not want in this country
- Line 10: scientists to exist. Israel, through its black (evil) proxy, pounded us at the Feizeeyeh school, it is
- Line 11: pounding us, it is pounding you, the people; it wants to control your economy, it wants to destroy your commerce
- Line 12: and agriculture, it wants to take over your wealth. Israel wants
- Line 13: through its proxies, remove the obstacles that are in its way, Those things that are blocking its way.
- Line 14: Wants to remove them from its path.
- Line 15: O Mr. Shah! O Excellency Shah! Miserable! Helpless! I give you some advice. O’
- Line 16: Excellency Shah! I am advising you Quit these deeds and change your ways! I don’t like it
- Line 17: that if some day your masters want you to go and then people give thanks! I don’t want you to end up like
- Line 18: your father…Miserable, helpless! 45 years of your life has passed. Exercise some patience and reflect on what you’re doing! Think a
- Line 19: little! Be considerate of the consequences of your actions. Learn a little from experience. Learn from what happened to your father.

In this speech, Khomeini frames the conflict as a struggle between Islam, the Islamic religious class and Islamic religious institutions on the one side, and the dictatorial Pahlavi
regime with the Shah at its helm, mainly as a puppet of Israel, on the opposite side. Israel is presented as the enemy of Islam: a greedy and manipulative power that wants to humiliate the Iranian people and control their commerce and seize their wealth.

This excerpted speech is part of a lesson about the formation of the Islamic movement in Iran. Similar to inquiry lessons, driven by well-crafted focus questions, Khomeini begins by posing five consecutive questions that reveal his values and framing of the struggle against the Shah’s regime. The manners in which questions are framed determine what solutions may solve them. In his first question, Khomeini frames the regime as being not only against the religious centers and the Islamic scholars but also against Koran itself. This way, he is able to appeal to the religious identity of people and represent the Shah’s regime as anti-Islam.

The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict allows Khomeini to characterize Israel as a greedy aggressor that is essentially against Islam. During the Revolution of 1979, another prominent slogan was, “Masses! Why are you sitting idle and doing nothing. Iran has become like Palestine!” Khomeini equates any attacks on the Islamic religious centers by the Shah’s forces as linked to Israel. Given the historical record of strong support of the United States for Israel and the Shah, Khomeini connects the dots and presents a simplified version of reality that appeals to his constituency. He warns people that the cost of not acting against the Shah would not only be great economic losses but also destruction of Islam.

The last five lines of his speech are directed at the Shah. Khomeini’s tone and language are worthy of note. The tone is quite condescending, humiliating, and at the same time, somewhat cautious and fatherly-like. The language is an informal conversation of the type that an adult in Iran may use when scolding a child for misbehaving. Khomeini uses the title “Mr.” to address the Shah, and in a sense, he challenges the Shah’s authority and stature. Khomeini also uses a polite version of “you” شما (line 15) to refer to the Shah. He dispenses advice to the Shah and encourages him to stop what he is doing and think about the consequences of his actions. This can be interpreted as a gentle warning to the reader: If the powerful Shah did not listen to me, we all know what happened to him and his regime. If you do not fall in line and support the regime, you can imagine what may happen to you too!

Khomeini gestures that he does not wish for the Shah to abdicate his throne. It is as though Khomeini does not or cannot imagine that his system of support can someday topple the mighty Shah of Iran. Here, he is functioning as a self-appointed religious advisor to the Shah who is reminding him of his duty to protect the people and the religious institutions of Islam.

In the Iranian psyche, the Shah is considered to be “The Shadow of God on Earth” شاه ساپای خدا and has a moral obligation and duty to safeguard the welfare of the people. In other words, the religious and political authorities converge under the concept of the Shah. When the Shah loses his popular support among his people and the country is not prosperous due to his neglect, (Farr-e Eezadi ایزدی) the Divine Blessing to Rule leaves him and his overthrow is justified. Ferdowsi’s legendary Shahnameh (Book of Kings) has several stories that illustrate this concept.

Next, I will present a summary of the lessons 10-16, using the authors’ voices. Authors are nameless and are only identified as The History Group: Office of Planning and Writing of Textbooks. If the summary lacks details, it is due to the nature of the text itself. I have tried to avoid mentioning direct quotes, since they are all from the same eighth-grade history textbook.
**The Pahlavi Dynasty**

In lesson 10, Reza Khan, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, is presented as a British pawn, chosen to command the armed forces of Iran as a counter-weight against Ahmad Shah, the last king of the Qajar dynasty. *Khan* is a title that is given to prominent landowners and influential men. With the British support, on October 13, 1925, Reza Khan became Reza Shah, and through him, the British were able to advance their goals in Iran. He is presented as a hypocrite who befriended the religious community prior to becoming the Shah of Iran. Once he became the Shah, he turned his back on the religious community by forcing women to abandon *hejab* (Islamic body cover) and dismissed religion as an obstacle to progress.

There is no image of Reza Shah in this lesson. Instead, half a page is dedicated to an image of Ahmad Shah, the last king of the Qajar dynasty. Children studying this lesson would have no idea what Reza Shah looked like. The only other picture in this lesson is an image of Ayatollah Seyed Hassan Moddaress, who was a prominent Shia religious leader. Moddaress is presented as an authority in religious and political matters, fighting against dictatorship and foreign influences. According to this lesson, Moddaress did not consider Reza to be the legitimate Shah of Iran; consequently, Moddaress was “martyred” by orders of “Reza Khan.” Even though by this time, twelve years had passed from the time that Reza Shah had assumed his role as the king, in this lesson he was “Reza Khan,” and not “Reza Shah.” This way, his legitimacy was severely undermined as a king who owed his throne to the British and not to the Iranian people.

Lesson 11 has only 4 pages and briefly discusses the impact of World War II on Iran with only 1 of those 4 pages taken up with 7 questions about the lesson. Imagine discussing the impact of World War II on Iran in just three pages! It suffices to say that the discussion is scant and ends with a summary table of some major events, before and after the World War II.

This lesson argues that Iran’s declared neutrality was sacrificed by Reza Shah for perceiving the Germans as a superior military power. Consequently, he established friendly ties with Germany and the Allies felt threatened by his move. Consequently, the Allied forces invaded Iran in 1941, and Reza Shah was replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza (the Shah). Reza Shah’s military forces are presented in this lesson as quite ineffective and incompetent in dealing with the European invaders. By referring to the armed forces of Iran as the “Reza Shah’s military,” the authors are creating a wedge between the people of Iran and its armed forces, implicating Reza Shah as an incompetent dictator.

Subsequent lessons continue to refer to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (the Shah) as an agent of the United States who owed his throne to the Central Intelligence Agency. He was depicted as a willing agent of the United States who opened up the country’s military bases to the U.S. military. The Shah was ultimately presented as an “enemy of Islam.” Similar to the previous lesson, no image of the shah and his family could be found in the school textbooks.

On the other hand, Khomeini is presented as the champion of Islam, the protector of Muslims, and the guardian of Iran’s independence. In lesson 14, there are 5 specific charges listed against the Pahlavi regime. They are as follows:

1. Wasting Iran’s wealth and resources like oil and other minerals;
2. Making Iran dependent upon foreign countries and transforming Iran into a market for Western products;
3. Promoting Westernization and demoting Islam;
4. Using the secret police (SAVAK) to create fear and prevent people from popular uprising, and

5. Protecting the American interests in the Persian Gulf area.

The United States of America

In lesson 11, the United States and Britain are depicted as dominant powers that interfere in the affairs of the East Asian countries. In response to this situation, Japan decided to fight them. An image of the atomic devastation caused by the U. S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki appears in this lesson. The caption highlights the death of thousands of Japanese people by the United States during the World War II.

In lesson 12, the United States is discussed as being in competition with Britain for dominating Iran’s rich resources. Finally, with the direct assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency, the United States succeeded in replacing Mosadegh with the Shah. The United States is depicted as the real force behind the Shah and his policies. According to this eighth-grade history textbook, interests of the United States were served by the Shah through his attempts at stopping popular movements from forming inside Iran and by maintaining a market for the American products. In addition, the United States was pushing for extending political immunity to its several thousand military personnel who worked in Iran during the years prior to 1979. The political immunity allowed U.S. citizens and military personnel to avoid being charged for their crimes against Iranian citizens. According to this lesson, some of those Americans in Iran did not treat the Iranian people with respect, and no one could do anything about it. Extending political immunity to Americans under this scenario was a major insult to the people of Iran.

Against this backdrop, Khomeini challenged the legitimacy of this immunity-extension for the Americans by voicing his objection. As a result, he was exiled to Turkey and later went to Iraq. Ultimately, the Islamic Revolution succeeded in 1979 and served as a beacon of hope for the oppressed masses and Moslems around the world. According to lesson 16, in 1979, the United States gave refuge to the Shah so that it could plot against the Islamic Republic of Iran. In response, university students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took the embassy workers hostage. Next, the United States brought its military forces into Iran to attack the country. However, a sandstorm in the desert of Tabas bogged down the American soldiers and caused them to flee. According to Lindaman and Ward (2004), what “shattered the aura of American invincibility” in Iran and the Middle East was the hostage crisis (p. 325).

This lesson highlights the negative relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, presenting the United States as a failed aggressor. This characterization is similar to the previous frames of the Iranian Muslims opposing foreign aggressors and their appointees. A significant grievance that the Islamic Republic of Iran has against the United States is the arming of Iraq when that country invaded Iran in September of 1980.

In sum, the United States of America is depicted as an arrogant country and the enemy of Islam and the people of Iran. The aims of the United States are presented as protecting its markets and controlling oil resources of the region. The United States of America is depicted as the real force behind the Shah and his anti-Islamic policies. There is nothing favorable about the United States in these lessons, and the authors of this textbook depict the United States as a foreign power determined to hurt the Islamic Republic.
Discussion

Educational textbooks in the Islamic Republic reflect the official views of history. A censored history of Iran is sandwiched between two large images of Khomeini and Khamenei.

Khomeini has replaced the Shah as the idealized figure with his image and words woven into the history textbooks. Images of women are noticeably absent from the eighth-grade history textbook while there are over forty pictures of men. There are 75 references to Islam or Islamic, and 82 times the word Imam is mentioned. Words like martyr, martyrdom, or martyrs are mentioned 26 times. These concepts provide a frame to understand the religious nature of the regime in Iran.

A new version of history is constructed based on Islamic Patriotism which is a form of patriotism that blends traditions and beliefs of Shia Islam with the Iranian nationalism to evoke a sense of religious and civic duty that demands sacrifices from individuals while improving and defending the Islamic Homeland. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, social and political powers favor those who support the regime. Meehan میهن is a Persian word that means homeland, and Vatan وطن is its Arabic equivalent that is also used by Iranians. It is common to see the concept of Meehan-e Islami میهن اسلامی used by the government. This is a clear example of blending Iranian nationalism with religious ideology of Islam.

Those who are not Muslims have suffered discrimination and have found it difficult or impossible to attend public universities, advance in the military, or secure important jobs. Applicants are screened for their ideology before being allowed to advance to higher posts. In addition, histories of the Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenians, and other minoritized groups are ignored or only briefly mentioned in the textbooks without much discussion or context.

Khomeini has repeatedly argued that teaching is a noble profession and what teachers do is equal to the works of Prophets that God has sent for humans. He supports education and development that are guided by Islam. When it comes to history education, the Islamic Republic wants Iranians to acquire its version of history. To highlight the importance of schooling in the lives of young people, Schutz (2004) argues, “The primary institution in most children’s lives is the school…” (p. 20). This is certainly true for Iranian children, too. Iranian youth are introduced to an array of Islamic concepts and asked to learn slogans, memorize certain facts, idealize certain beliefs, and see the world in a way that the theocrats want. The absence of competing viewpoints and the dominance of a given narrative about history prepare the ground for indoctrination of children instead of an education based on reason and inquiry.
In my informal interviews of those who used these textbooks when they went to school in Iran, I learned that students did not like to study history. They did their homework and memorized the text in order to pass their exams. Because many Iranian families have access to shortwave radios, the internet, and satellite broadcasting programs, they get their information from non-governmental sources. Therefore, their children have learned to recognize the propagandist nature of the textbooks and have developed their own way of coping with the situation. Learning to negotiate the school environment, where indoctrination rules, with their home environment, where countersocialization rules, is not without psychological and social costs (Ebadi, 2006; Moaveni, 2005). In a textbook-driven curriculum controlled by theocrats, curriculum has become a tool for religious and political indoctrination. It is common for children to line up and chant slogans at the start of a typical school day before attending classes.

There is clear evidence that the government of the Islamic Republic considers the history curriculum to be vital. The importance of studying history is emphasized by statements that appear on the back cover of the eighth-grade history textbook. Those statements highlight the need to know the past and its implications for the current events in Iran. The concluding statement is also about Khomeini’s views on the importance of studying history: a history that serves Islam and this regime. Eighth-grade and higher history textbooks emphasize the coverage of events dealing with the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry and a continuous need to safeguard against foreign intentions vis-à-vis Islam and Iran. Outside powers are presented as greedy countries who are trying to dominate Iran and rob the country of its resources. This phenomenon is characterized by a simple version of us against them narrative. There is a clear dichotomous presentation of history in which assumptions and highlighted facts lead to glorification of the religious leaders and condemnation of foreign powers and the Shah. In such a situation, according to Code (1991), “A knower must either value objectivity absolutely or succumb to the vagaries of subjectivity run wild; there is no middle ground” (p. 30). The history lessons I have examined do indeed represent such a phenomenon because of the absence of opposing viewpoints and an uncritical presentation of history.
Code’s discussion of the complex nature of subjectivity can be helpful here to contextualize knowledge within a broad range that includes historical location and socio-linguistic framework. She argues, “Knowledge is subjective and objective in several fairly uncontroversial ways” (p. 46). The complex web of control dominated by the religious leaders in Iran makes it possible for the promotion of a particular ideology in the textbooks. Students have very little choice but to study them and try to pass their exams. Chomsky (2003) refers to this model of schools as places where “they reward discipline and obedience, and they punish independence of mind” (p. 28). In this obedience and conformity model designed to serve the theocratic regime, schools play an important role in socializing children.

Conclusions

It is important to understand a revolution that has changed Iran and influenced the Middle East. Clearly, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran do not see eye to eye on a number of issues, and outstanding grievances on both sides have not been addressed yet. This study should be of particular interest to curriculum specialists and those who use textbooks as tools of teaching and learning. Similar to the situation in Iraq, Iranian curriculum writers have omitted certain information from the national curriculum and have concentrated on building and maintaining an ideology based on Shia Islam and nationalism. Similar to Spain during the Franco rule, theocrats in Iran have engaged in building a hierarchical order of authority that elevates the ruler to someone who is only responsible to God and questioning him would be a crime.

I have tried to show the ideological underpinnings of the theocratic regime in Iran. The symbolic role that Khomeini and religious leaders play in defining the Islamic Republic vis-à-vis their struggle against adversaries and preservation of their theocracy is significant. The textbook identifies the adversaries of the regime and outlines their motives.

There are seven summary points that I want to make. First, there are clear dichotomous comparisons between the Shia religious figures as defenders of Islam and people’s interests on the one side and with the Shah, the United States of America, and Israel on the other side. The Iranian Shia religious leaders are depicted as champions of freedom and guardians of the people. The theocratic regime led by religious men is depicted as a credible force capable of countering foreign threats and protecting the integrity and honor of the Islamic homeland. Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son (the Shah) are depicted as agents of the British and the United States whose goals were to keep order in the country for the benefits of their masters. Eventually, the Pahlavi regime was overthrown in 1979, and readers are reminded that it is their religious and civic duty to support the regime and sacrifice on its behalf.

Second, the Islamic Republic is depicted as the product of a popular indigenous uprising that was chosen by the Iranian people. People came together to save their Islamic identity and voted for an Islamic Republic led by Khomeini. Therefore, the theocratic regime can claim to be the legitimate voice of the people, and anyone opposing it is considered an enemy of Islam.

Third, Iran and other countries in the Middle East are depicted as valuable lands that are prized for their oil, geopolitical, and economic considerations which are also presented as the real reasons for the Western powers wanting to dominate the region. Curiously enough, the curriculum materials called *Shifting Sands: Balancing U.S. Interests in the Middle East* produced in the United States at Brown University by Choices for the 21st Century Education Program offers a similar argument.
Fourth, the Islamic Republic is presented as a major force capable of not only stopping Westernization trends in Iran but also limiting the influences of the super powers in the region. Also, the textbook shows the Islamic Republic of Iran engaged in revitalizing Islamic religious and cultural values in Iran. Islamic religious figures and holidays are highlighted, and a generous dose of Islamic concepts referring to Khomeini, Islam, or martyrdom are woven into the narratives.

Fifth, fighting against “Zionism” in support of the Palestinian cause is presented as honorable. An image that drives this point home is that of Dr. Mostafa Chamran, the former Defense Secretary of the Islamic Republic, surveying the frontlines during the Iran-Iraq war. According to the caption, he spent some years in Lebanon and Palestine fighting against “Zionism.” He died in the Iran-Iraq war, and his life is presented as the ideal way that a true Muslim should live. Israel is depicted as an enemy of Iran, determined to destroy Iran’s religious schools, economy, and scientific assets. These claims are not warranted, so the readers are left to connect the dots on their own.

Sixth, Islamic Republic is a survivor. After reading the textbook, one is left with the impression that the Islamic Republic has been successful in neutralizing all threats. This is attributed to divine blessing and sacrifices people have made to preserve the regime and defend the country. The United States’ support for Saddam’s regime during the 8-year war with Iran and the destruction it caused are emphasized in the final pages of the textbook. Colorful photos show bombed buildings, a mosque, and lines of adolescent youth dressed in army uniforms heading to defend the homeland.

Seventh, the Islamic Republic of Iran has several grievances against the United States that are outlined in the history textbook. The main grievances include the following: (a) a long history of continued support for the Shah at the expense of the Iranian people; (b) violating Iranian sovereignty by overthrowing the Mosadegh’s government in 1953; (c) supporting the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein during the 1980-1988 war with Iran that caused heavy human and property losses, and (d) continued United States’ hostility toward the regime.

Given how sensitive the issue of history education is because of its political and ideological dimensions, educators can take comfort in knowing, there are other models that teach history (Levstik & Barton, 2001; Thornton, 2005) the democratic way (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans, 1996; Hahn, 1996; Parker, 2003; Soder, 2001). As educators, we can just teach the past or suggest a future, too. Let me suggest that it is time to take a bold step in fully exposing grievances of the United States and Iran as a first move in resolving problems peacefully. Waging peace requires courage and is a better way to promote democracy.
Photos show damages caused by the Iraqi shelling of Iranian cities (on the right, p. 94).
The caption on the lower right hand side reads: “Fighters of Islam at the time of Saddam’s Attack on Iran: All people, even the young and adolescent youth prepared themselves to defend the homeland.”

On the top left, the photo shows people welcoming the Iranian POWs of the Iran-Iraq War. On the lower left, the caption shows “Martyr Dr. Mostafa Chamran,” Defense Secretary surveying the front during the early days of the Iran-Iraq war (p. 95).
References


