

# Chapter One: The Iranian Education System

## A. Structure and Figures

*Iranian Ministry of Education and Training [Vezarat-e Amuzesh o Parvaresh] is responsible for the regular pre-university school system, which includes three phases: Primary [Dabestan or Ebtedayi] – 5 years (ages 6-10), Lower Secondary [Rahnamayi] – 3 years (ages 11-13), and Upper Secondary [Dabirestan or Motavasete] – 3 years (ages 14-16). In other words, the Iranian school system comprises 11 years. Students who wish to continue their studies in institutions of higher education should take a twelfth year called "Pre-University" [Pish-Daneshgahi]. Education in all state schools is free and is compulsory in Primary school. Private schools do exist and may charge tuition, but are all considered non-profit organizations and are subject to Ministerial supervision. All schools are single-sex institutions.*

*Up to, and including, Upper Secondary phase's first grade (grade 9), the curriculum is basically uniform. Students in grades 2 and 3 (10, 11) of the said phase, study in different streams. There are "theoretical" streams [nazari], such as Humanities, Mathematical-Physical, and Empirical Sciences, and technical and vocational streams such as agricultural, industrial, etc. The three theoretical streams exist in the Pre-University phase as well.*

*The figures available on the Internet are not wholly accurate. Following are two sets of (approximated and computed) figures for the school year of 2002/3, one given by the Iranian Ministry of Education and another – by UNESCO:*

<u>Category</u>	<u>Iranian MOE</u>	<u>UNESCO</u>
Students – total number	16,000,000	17,000,000
% Females	48%	
Primary – total number	6,600,000	7,000,000
% Females	48%	48%
% Net enrolment		86%
Secondary – total	8,500,000	10,000,000
% Females		47%
Lower Secondary	4,700,000	
% Females	46%	
Upper Secondary	3,800,000	
% Females	49%	
Schools – total number	137,600 <sup>2</sup>	
Primary – total number	67,800	
Lower Secondary	31,500	
Upper Secondary	15,200	

*(The figures related to the teaching staff are not compatible with one another and have been left out).*

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<sup>2</sup> Including kindergartens, vocational, pre-university and other forms of schools

Sources:

Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Education  
213.176.19.4/medu/index.aspx

UNESCO, *Education for All: Global Monitoring Report, 2006*

[www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/annex2\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/annex2_eng.pdf)

## **B. Subjects and Textbooks**

*The basic subjects in all Primary school grades are Persian, mathematics, empirical sciences, and Koran studies. The Persian language is the compulsory language of instruction in all schools. Although the Iranian constitution recognizes the ethnic minorities' right to teach their respective languages in school, no language textbook other than a Persian one appears in the textbooks list provided by the Ministry on its website, and, if such non-Persian textbooks do exist, they are probably issued and given to the students locally. Religious instruction is added in grade 2 of Primary school, with a special appendix issued for Sunnite students. This appendix replaces certain lessons in the main textbook that follow the Shiite precepts. In some cases, the lessons in the appendix have a religious Sunnite character, for example, they mention the first caliphs in their Sunnite titles – 'the Rightly Guided Caliphs [Al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun in Arabic]', a title which is not to be found in Shiite parlance. In other cases, the parallel lesson in the appendix is not religious at all and it just replaces a Shiite text. There is, for example, a lesson dealing with the (common Sunnite and Shiite) holiday of Id al-Fitr, with the same text. The only difference is that, in the accompanying illustration in the Sunnite version, a figure of a Shiite clergyman is missing from a celebrating crowd. As for non-Muslim students, the Ministry of Education issues a single book for grades 9-11 titled 'Studies of the Divine Religions and Morals – the Religious Minorities'. Unfortunately, the website mentioning this book does not provide an example of the material it contains. At any rate, it is obvious from personal testimonies of non-Muslim students in the Iranian education system that the core of the non-Muslim religious school material is provided by the various religious communities themselves in their own schools.*

*The subject of social studies is added in grade 3 and it includes geography and history. These three subjects (civics, geography and history) are studied separately in the Lower Secondary phase, in addition to foreign languages: Arabic and English, beginning in grade 6, and French and German, from grade 7 on. The subject of Defense Readiness is introduced into the curriculum in grade 8.*

*In the Upper Secondary phase's first grade, the students also study physics, chemistry, and biology. In the last two years (grades 10, 11) the students study in separate streams sharing some subjects and specializing in others. The Humanistic stream focuses in grade 10 on Arabic, geography, history, literature, economy, sociology and statistics, and, in grade 11 – also on mathematics, psychology, logic, and philosophy. There are several optional subjects such as 'Dialogue of Civilizations' introduced under the former president Mohammad Khatami, 'Law Studies for Youths', 'Acquaintance with Important Social Laws', etc. One important subject studied in all streams is 'Readiness for Earthquake' – a constantly looming danger in Iran.*

*Textbooks are published by a special section in the Ministry of Education – the General Bureau for Textbooks Printing and Distribution. Most of them carry on their front page a photograph of the late Ayatollah Khomeini with a short dictum taken from his writings or sayings. All the 105 textbooks available for this research were published in 2004. 16 of the 20 teacher's guides were published in the 2000s, mostly in 2003, and three – in the late 1990s. One teacher's guide was published in 1994.*

*Sources:*

- 1. Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Education, Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), The General Bureau for Textbooks Printing and Distribution.  
[www.chap.sch.ir](http://www.chap.sch.ir)*
- 2. The Iranian schoolbooks available to CMIP.*

### **C. Policy and Problems**

*Other than obvious goals stated in the Iranian Ministry of Education's website, such as promoting knowledge, no detailed document on this subject has been found on the Internet (in contrast with the detailed educational policy statement which appears on the website of the Saudi Arabian ministry of education). Policy lines thus have to be inferred from the material appearing in the textbooks themselves. Following are some comments on this issue, which deserves a specific study beyond the scope of this research.*

*Political indoctrination is the most evident policy line. Students (and teachers in the teacher's guides) are directed to adopt the regime's view, without the slightest option of criticism. According to this view, the world is divided into two distinct parts: good ('us') and evil (the US), between which an endless state of war exists. The indoctrination effort includes the following components:*

- Developing a sense of an external threat, of total mobilization and of readiness for sacrifice.*
- Fostering a sense of loyalty to the regime through the glorification of its symbols, chief among them being the Islamic Revolution and the personality of the late Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>3</sup>*
- Emphasizing patriotic unity for all ethnic groups in Iran, by utilizing their common Muslim religion (the non-Muslim minorities are very small and do not have any territorial base – unlike the Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, etc.).*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ayatollah Khomeini is often titled 'Imam' which indicates the great esteem he is held in, almost to the degree of a holy man like the historical Shiite Imams. A story in one of the books describes an instance in an Iraqi camp of Iranian POWs where the prisoners uttered blessings whenever the Iraqi commander mentioned Khomeini's name, as is usually done when Prophet Muhammad's name is mentioned, which infuriated the commander. See *Defense Readiness 2 – Teacher's Guide, High School Grades* (2002) pp. 9-10.*

*In contrast with political indoctrination, purely professional education is relatively free, and students are encouraged to pursue their own investigations.*

*Another important policy line is the emphasis in the Iranian school textbooks on gender equality in social and educational life, in spite of the legal inferiority of women in the religious system and in spite of the restrictions imposed on them in public life. The books treat both sexes equally. In Arts and Crafts textbook, for example, female students are shown working with electricity and on metal products that one would assume to be part of 'man's realm'. Another textbook shows female students climbing up a mountain. Such expressions would not be found in, say, Saudi Arabian textbooks.*

*The main problems facing the Iranian education system are as follows:*

- 1. Iran is a vast country with a fast growing population (though birth rate has dropped tremendously during the last decade). A great deal of effort has been successfully made by the government during the post-Revolution years to extend education countrywide, but disparities still exist between the main cities and the countryside.*
- 2. Female education is still lagging behind male education in the remote areas.*
- 3. Although primary education is obligatory, about 14% of the primary school age group was not regularly enrolled in 2002/3, mostly in the periphery. The rate of female drop-out population was slightly higher.*
- 4. Illiteracy is still a problem among adults, mainly women, in the rural areas, in spite of the government's efforts to reduce it. The figures available in the Internet in this respect for the early 2000s fluctuate between 14-20%.*

*On the whole, Iranian education is taking steps forward in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Its acute problem lies in its heavily politicized nature, and, more accurately, in the spirit of anti-Western Jihad it instills in the minds of generations of Iranian school students, as can be seen in the chapters below.*