

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF IRAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM DURING THE PAHLAVI ERA

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Annotation: *This article analyzes the distinctive features of education during the Pahlavi era, the establishment of foreign schools and educational institutions, and the positive impact these had on the significant increase in literacy among the population. Although the early stages of the modern Iranian education system date back to the Qajar era, its main foundation was laid by Reza Shah Pahlavi, and the Pahlavis played a crucial role in shaping modern education in Iran.*

Keywords. *Iran, education, foreign school, Reza Shah, curriculum, Ministry of education, secondary education.*

Introduction: The modernization of Iran's educational system underwent significant transformation during the Pahlavi era. While the roots of formal education in Iran can be traced back to the Qajar dynasty, it was under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi that a more structured, modern, and secular education system began to take shape. This period marked the establishment of numerous foreign and domestic schools, as well as various higher education institutions that aimed to align Iran with Western educational standards. The government's emphasis on expanding access to education led to a notable rise in literacy rates across the country. This introduction examines the educational policies of the Pahlavi regime, the types of schools founded during that time, and the broader impact these developments had on Iranian society.

In 1921, fundamental reforms in education and the establishment of a modern educational structure had not yet been fully implemented. During the early years of Reza Shah's rule, primary attention was focused on internal security. Other aspects of national reform, particularly military reforms, were carried out swiftly; however, educational reforms were promoted only by small groups. The structure of the Ministry of Education from 1910–1911 remained largely intact.

The establishment of the Supreme Council of Higher Education in 1921 is considered the first attempt at reforming the education system. This council was intended to define, oversee, encourage, and advise the Ministry of Education in its educational policies. One

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of its clearly stated responsibilities in the council's charter was "a thorough review of the curricula of 18 schools in Europe"⁴¹.

An even more important task was the preparation of curricula for pedagogical colleges intended for middle-aged men and women. This represented the country's first initiative aimed at the professional training of teachers.

The council's agenda also included several other matters, such as: organizing the use of *waqf* (endowment) funds to support public schools; evaluating the qualifications of individuals wishing to open private schools or publish periodicals or newspapers; assessing the literacy levels of teachers in state-run schools; sending students to Europe for study at the government's expense; and reviewing subject curricula approved by the Ministry of Education. In 1921, the Ministry of Education for the first time established a complete secondary education curriculum. This program was modeled on European school standards and was designed as a six-year course following the French lycée system. It formed part of a twelve-year modern school system, which was divided into primary and secondary levels.

According to the program, students who completed the 6th, 9th, and 12th grades were required to take examinations administered by the Ministry of Education. The primary school curriculum included subjects such as Persian, Arabic (which was removed from the primary curriculum in 1930 and limited to the secondary level), arithmetic, Persian history, world geography, and physical education. Starting in 1936, art and music were also added to the primary school curriculum. Starting from the seventh grade, the curriculum was expanded to include subjects such as geometry, natural sciences, foreign language (French), Arabic, world history, and health education. Over the following two years, additional subjects such as algebra, biology, physics, chemistry, geology, and technical drawing were introduced. In the final three years of secondary education, subjects like trigonometry, advanced geometry, zoology, and elementary economics were added. Upon reaching the twelfth grade, students were divided into three academic tracks: exact sciences, natural sciences, and humanities.

The first track focused on mathematics, including arithmetic, analytical geometry, and astronomy. The second track included psychology and human anatomy. The third track offered logic, philosophy, history, literary analysis, and Arabic literature.

Persian language instruction itself was divided into separate courses: grammar, composition, literature, and the history of the Persian language. The inclusion of scientific subjects in the curriculum was carried out gradually. The entire period from 1921 to 1941 can be considered a time of curriculum expansion and experimentation. It was also recognized as a period marked by reforms inspired by European models. Starting in 1928, the Majlis (Parliament) allocated funds each year to send 100 students to study in America and Europe, with 35 percent of the funds specifically designated for training qualified teachers. From 1929, the Tehran Pedagogical College began offering

⁴¹ Amin Banani. *Impact of the West on Iran, 1921-1941: A study in modernization of social institutions.* // Stanford University, 1959 July. -P.147.

government scholarships annually to 15 students. By the final year of Reza Shah's reign, such scholarships had been introduced at a total of 36 colleges across the country. These scholarships played a key role in the students' future careers, influencing promotions and retirement benefits⁴².

Due to the long-standing issue of textbook shortages, beginning in 1928, the Ministry of Public Education began publishing 25 standardized and official textbooks. These were primarily based on the French model. With the introduction of these new textbooks, the traditional group memorization and recitation method was abolished in schools.

Despite the growing number of new schools, there were still a limited number of private schools in the country. These were typically run by religious minorities such as Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Armenians. However, even these types of schools gradually came under the influence of their foreign counterparts and increasingly adopted Western educational models. For instance, American Baha'is played a significant role in establishing Baha'i schools for boys. Similarly, in Zoroastrian schools, Persian Zoroastrians from India—many of whom had been educated in Britain—played an important role. The Baha'i schools in Tehran, which offered both primary and secondary education, maintained a notable reputation during Reza Shah's reign, despite facing official pressures, public prejudice, and opposition from the clergy.

In fact, many of Tehran's open-minded and influential families sent their children to these schools. Remarkably, even Reza Shah's eldest daughter and son received their early primary education in Baha'i schools. The government's policy toward such schools aligned with Reza Shah's vision of national centralization. On occasion, when these schools faced financial difficulties, the government provided subsidies. However, their textbooks and examination formats were required to be the same as those used in state schools, and their teachers had to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

In October 1930, the Ministry passed a law stating that "*private schools with academic qualifications and adherence to moral standards would be officially recognized by the state*". Following this, some of the aforementioned Baha'i and Armenian schools were shut down due to holding unauthorized religious ceremonies that were not recognized by the state. In schools, Qur'an courses were reduced, and only the memorization of Hadiths was permitted⁴³.

In rural areas, the state of education was initially dire. Young peasants had very limited access to schooling, and the quality of rural schools was poor. In fact, the rural education system in Iran had seen little improvement compared to previous dynasties. Reza Shah's policy of modernizing and standardizing education also extended to missionary schools. His first step was to bring foreign schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Starting in 1928, regulations were enacted for missionary

⁴² Cf. Iran, Majlis. Qavanin, seventh session. -P.193.

⁴³ Amin Banani. Impact of the West on Iran, 1921-1941: A study in modernization of social institutions. // Stanford university, 1959. -P.199-200.

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schools, requiring that they use official textbooks like those in state schools, follow the same curriculum, and teach Persian alongside other languages. However, by 1940, the nationalist policy of the Ministry of Education had intensified to such an extent that all foreign missionary teachers were ordered to leave the country. Their schools were taken over by the Ministry and continued operating as state-run institutions.

Another impact of the West on Iran's education system can be seen in the emergence and development of technical schools. Various schools and colleges were established not by the Ministry of Education, but by ministries such as Industry, Communications, Health, Agriculture, Finance, and Mining, in order to train skilled personnel for their respective sectors.

Iran's first independent polytechnic school was founded in 1922 in Tehran by a group of German engineers with modest government subsidies. During Reza Shah's reign, this polytechnic school became known as the Iran-Germany Industrial School and remained the most prominent technical institution in the country. Notably, when foreign schools were nationalized in 1940 under the nationalization policy and foreign teachers were expelled, the German staff of this school were the only foreigners allowed to continue working. Before the founding of the University of Tehran, the Ministries of Health and Agriculture had already established medical and veterinary colleges with the assistance of French professors. These colleges were later incorporated into the University of Tehran⁴⁴.

Additionally, military training schools were established by the Ministry of War in major cities such as Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Kermanshah. These schools operated under Western supervision. The visual arts were not neglected either. In the early 1930s, an Academy of Music and Fine Arts was established. At the Fine Arts Academy, students were taught Persian culture and arts, crafts, carpet design, miniature painting, pottery, and more. However, at the Music Academy, the strong influence of Western music was clearly evident.

Reza Shah's focus on higher education began as early as 1921, the first year of his rule, with the establishment of a law school staffed by French and Iranian instructors, aimed at training personnel for the Ministry of Justice. One of the earliest major goals of both Reza Shah and the Ministry of Education was the establishment of a national university. Although the law officially establishing the university was passed in 1934, several institutions of higher learning had already existed prior to that and were incorporated into the university upon its foundation. Since most professors were French and all textbooks were in French, knowledge of the French language was mandatory for students. The university officially began operations on February 5, 1935, following a ceremonial inauguration by Reza Shah. The institution's charter was modeled on European standards. Academic ranks, salaries, course schedules, and department

⁴⁴ Amin Banani. *Impact of the West on Iran, 1921-1941: A study in modernization of social institutions.* // Stanford university, 1959. -P.155.

structures were all regulated by the Ministry of Education⁴⁵. (After the fall of Reza Shah's regime, the university was removed from the ministry's authority and became fully autonomous.)

Initially, the university consisted of five faculties: Arts, Research, Medicine, Law, and Engineering. Later, existing colleges of Theology, Fine Arts, and Agriculture were incorporated as three additional faculties under the university. The duration of study was six years in the Faculty of Medicine, four years in Engineering, and three years in the remaining faculties. Nearly all the university's instructors were Europeans, primarily French. Only a small number of older professors taught Arabic and Persian literature.

French education and culture held such dominance at the institution that students who had been educated in English often faced open discrimination. The university community was composed mostly of students from Tehran, due to the limited availability of student housing for those from other provinces. During its first decade, the University of Tehran attracted students from India, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, and the Soviet Union.

The education of Iranian students in Europe and America contributed significantly to the growing influence of the West in Iran. Due to their curiosity and limited familiarity with the traditions of Persian culture, these students often embraced Western education and culture with genuine enthusiasm and a positive outlook. Upon returning to Iran, they were typically offered high-ranking positions, and their professional roles in influential sectors further fueled the country's social interest in the West.

Starting from Reza Shah's era, the composition of students studying abroad began to shift. While previously only children of the aristocracy studied in Europe, now students from lower-income backgrounds could also study abroad if they passed the necessary exams. In 1932, for the first time, the Iranian government sent students to the United States for their studies.

According to records from 1940, between 1922 and 1938, 396 students had returned to Iran after completing their studies in Europe, while 452 were still pursuing their education abroad⁴⁶. These figures include only those students sent by the Ministry of Education. If students who financed their own education are also counted, the total number of Iranians studying abroad exceeded 1,500. Although exact statistics are not available, the majority of this group is believed to have studied at institutions of higher learning in France.

One of Reza Shah's most widely supported reforms was the establishment of adult education. Although this initiative was among the early plans of the Shah's reformist regime, the Ministry of Education did not implement it until 1936. During the 1936–1937

⁴⁵ Nahid Rashedi. *History of Iranian education: Influence of Islam and The West.* // The University of Michigan, 1984, -P.116.

⁴⁶ Elwell-Sutton, *A Guide to Iranian Area Study*, Michigan, 1952, p. 138

academic year, a total of 1,500 evening classes for adults were opened across all primary schools in the country⁴⁷.

Initially, adult education was divided into two categories: "Completely Illiterate" and "Those with Basic Reading and Writing Skills." The aim was to combat illiteracy and nurture citizens who could think independently. The adult education program lasted two years in total. New books and pamphlets were published specifically for adult learners. To encourage reading and vocabulary development, a special column was dedicated to adult learners in Tehran's major newspaper *Ettelaat*. Attendance in these classes was made mandatory for all illiterate or semi-literate employees in government institutions.

To further encourage participation, associations were established across the country, and effort cards were distributed to diligent students. By the end of the first year, 9,356 adult learners received literacy certificates. By the end of the second year, expenditures for adult education had doubled. The number of evening classes rose to 1,700, teacher salaries increased by 45 percent, and the total number of adult students reached 124,000.

By the end of 1940, the total number of adult learners had grown. Encouraged by the success of the adult education program, the Ministry of Education assumed responsibility for mass public education and propaganda. A new department called the "People's Education Office" (*Xalq Ma'rifati*) was established within the Ministry. This organization sponsored large-scale public lectures delivered by prominent officials and professors on themes such as "Modernism," "Patriotism," and "Loyalty to Sovereignty." Another two key aspects of the Shah's attempts to Westernize education were the secularization of education and the expansion of education for women. Alongside the modernization of educational institutions, the interference of religious leaders in educational affairs was curtailed. In 1921, a law was passed to restrict their activities.

Since religious scholars still held significant influence over traditional schools, the Shah made strong efforts to close such schools. He also sought to bring the endowments (waqf funds) belonging to them under state control. These measures led to the persecution of many religious scholars and even bloodshed. Furthermore, a special certification system was introduced to verify the establishment of religious seminaries (madrasas) and confirm that students were genuinely enrolled there. As a result of these policies, from 1932 onwards, the number of madrasas and their students steadily declined. In the final years of Reza Shah's reign, the curriculum of primary schools was revised, and religious education was completely removed. However, during this period, only a few clerics and large landowners did not oppose the Shah and managed to preserve their estates and continue their activities on a smaller scale.

Reza Shah's secularization policy was closely linked to his government's efforts to improve the status of women. He sought to eliminate traditions such as female seclusion, the secondary status of women in marriage, and polygamy. In 1935, the practice of veiling (chador) was banned. Higher education institutions for women were established.

⁴⁷ Amin Banani. *Impact of the West on Iran, 1921-1941: A study in modernization of social institutions.* // Stanford University, 1959 July. -P.164.

Physical education classes were organized for women, and collective sports clubs were formed for them. However, despite social and cultural changes, the position of women changed little. The proportion of girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools remained low, and dropout rates were high. For example, of the 128,000 girls admitted to primary school in 1949, only about 50,000 reached the sixth grade. Similarly, while 20,000 female students were admitted to the first year of university, only 2,000 graduated by the end of the academic year. Until the reign of Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza, women did not study at Tehran University⁴⁸.

Another important aspect of the modernization policy in education was sports. Physical education included Swedish sports disciplines such as gymnastics, athletics, volleyball, football, and basketball. In 1933, the Ministry of Education established the "Physical Education Council," which annually organized nationwide championships. The council also worked to revive traditional national sports like horseback riding and wrestling.

Foreign diplomats introduced sports such as tennis and table tennis. In 1936, at the invitation of the crown prince returning from Switzerland, military parades were introduced in schools. From 1939 onward, the school curriculum included four hours of military training per week for grades 10, 11, and 12, with the responsibility of providing training officers for army education assigned to schools⁴⁹.

Alongside the Westernization of the education system, Reza Shah prioritized fostering a sense of national identity. This goal deeply influenced the school system. As part of the broader effort to build an Iranian national people from the country's diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, he developed an official nationalist ideology based on the ancient glory of the Shahs of Iran. He utilized archaeological research and historical monuments to demonstrate the country's great past.

At the same time, he sought to purify the Persian language by removing foreign elements, particularly Arab loanwords, from its vocabulary. The country's name was officially changed from Persia to Iran. All students were required to memorize patriotic poems and songs.

This new ideology, with its emphasis on nationalism and loyalty, permeated the entire education system, reviving love for the Shah and the homeland. However, the strict ideological and authoritarian regime, and the heavy pressure placed on students from primary education onwards, did not produce the expected results.

Conclusion. During Reza Shah's reign, significant attention was given to adopting Western technological and cultural achievements. Although a comprehensive modernization program for Iran was developed, the Shah was unable to fully manipulate the country due to the continued socio-political control exerted by aristocratic landowners

⁴⁸ Amin Banani. *Impact of the West on Iran, 1921-1941: A study in modernization of social institutions.* // Stanford University, 1959 July. -P.119.

⁴⁹ Nahid Rashedi. *History of Iranian education: Influence of Islam and the west.* // The university of Michigan, 1984. -P.170.

and powerful Shi'a clerics. Despite frequent discussions about Westernizing Iran, few concrete steps were actually taken. From a developmental perspective, the Shah did not possess a strong or coherent modernization ideology. Traditionalism continued to dominate many spheres of society. Educational processes often emphasized nationalism and glorification of Iran's ancient Persian past, which ultimately led to limited success. Reza Shah was known for imprisoning any minister who refused to conform to his system, regardless of their competence. He did not allocate significant funds for the development of public education; during his reign, only about 4% of the state budget was spent on educational expenses.

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