Published: December 15, 1985
Last Updated: July 6, 2018

ALBORZ COLLEGE

ALBORZ COLLEGE, an American Presbyterian missionary institution in Tehran; starting as a grade school in 1873, it grew to a junior college in 1924 and an accredited liberal arts college by 1928. In 1940 it was closed and its property bought by the government of Iran. At first called the American College, it took the name of the Alborz mountains, at the foothills of which it was located, in the early 1930s in deference to the Persianization of foreign names.

American missionary enterprise began in Iran in 1834 among the Christian Armenians and Assyrians of Azarbaijan; work among Moslems was almost impossible. In 1870 missionaries came to Tehran and three years later started a school in the Armenian quarter. The Armenian bishop complained to the shah that "the Americans had come to turn the Armenians and Mohammadans from the faith of their fathers;" not finding any Moslems in the school, the government inspector dropped the matter (*A Century of Mission Work in Iran, 1834-1934*, Beirut, p. 54; A. Boyce, "Alborz College of Tehran and Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan," in A. P. Saleh, ed., *Cultural Ties Between Iran and The United States*, Tehran, 1976, p. 176). The location of the school soon changed, and its language of instruction became Persian. By 1891, over half of the 135 students were Moslem.

In 1898 the Rev. Samuel Martin Jordan and his wife Mary arrived in Tehran to assume leadership of the school. Jordan's educational goals were clearly formulated as early as 1906: "The young oriental educated in Western lands as a rule gets out of touch with his home country. . . . Too often he discards

indiscriminately the good and the bad of the old civilization and fails to assimilate the best of the West. He loses all faith in his old religion and gets nothing in its stead. . . . We adapt the best Western methods to the needs of the country while we retain all that is good in their own civilization" (*Microfilms of East Persian Mission*, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, vol. 189, no. 2).

In 1914 forty-four acres were bought just outside the northern city gate for the future college. The school moved to Rollstone Hall on the new campus, which had a resident hall and athletic fields, in 1923. One wing of the building housed twenty thousand books at a time when no other western-style school in Iran had a library; soon added were the first science hall in Iran with modern laboratories, further dormitories, and an infirmary. In 1928 the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York granted a charter to confer B.A. degrees ("Alborz College," p. 182). The first graduating class of the elementary school in 1891 numbered five, three Armenians and two Jews. In the last commencement of the college held in 1940 there were 106 junior college graduates, and twenty B.A.s, including four women.

The above account of the growth of an educational institution would not be extraordinary if not for the fact that it took place in Iran when its people were still thoroughly shaped by traditional ways of life and just beginning to undergo a modern political awakening. For years the leaders of Iran had been trying to find a third country to neutralize the power of Russia in the north and Great Britain in the south, and they set their eyes on the United States. *Ḥabl al-matīn*, a Persian paper published in Calcutta, reasoned in 1907 that "90 percent of Japanese progress has been caused by employing Americans. America is a republic, which means that individual Americans are not agents of their government. They are rich and do not need our wealth. They are progressive and helpful" (*Microfilms*, vol. 190, no. 45). Even though the Russians, British, French and Germans had opened schools in Iran, it was to the American schools that the leaders of the country, from the royal family on down, sent their sons and daughters. But the attractiveness of Alborz College had little to do with politics. In an Iran just beginning to modernize, people liked many things that the Americans had to offer.

The main purpose of the missionaries was to evangelize the country, but in this regard they had meager success. Hence they offered the Iranians the "best" of American civilization, which, in their view, was the direct result of Christianity. This was presented as "character building," which had two

ingredients: “piety” and a set of values. The former included Sunday observance and a ban on smoking, “swearing” (i.e., mentioning the name of God), and drinking. Anyone caught smoking was fined and the money used to heat the class rooms in the winter. Though Persian is replete with the name of god, the students learned not to mention it. Drinking was an embarrassing subject for the missionaries because the brewers of alcoholic beverages were mostly Armenian Christians, but the ban was enforced. In 1913 the government asked the school to close on Fridays and open on Sundays like other schools; after a long negotiation it was agreed to close on both Fridays and Sundays.

The more important ingredient of character building was the set of values; among these were: 1. Dignity of work. At Alborz manual labor, which Iranians considered degrading for a person who could read and write, was the order of the day. On one occasion in 1917, Dr. Jordan led a group of his boys, each with a shovel over his shoulder, to the new campus to level a soccer field. After several hours of work he told them that a “new era” had come to Iran and that “henceforth any kind of work that is of service to mankind is honorable” (“Alborz College,” p. 198). From that day on students who had never done manual work leveled athletic fields, built roads, removed dirt, and planted trees; when work scholarships were introduced, students held responsible jobs in every department of the college. The students were mentally prepared for this both by the example of their American teachers and by the introduction of sports. Learning and sedate dignity used to go together in Iran; it was scandalous for educated men to kick a ball around. Most of the sports like soccer, basketball, volleyball, track, and tennis were first played by the students of the American schools. In the summer camp that the college maintained, mountaineering was popular. Practically every year a number of students would climb the 5,600 meter Mt. Damāvand to the chagrin of many parents. 2. Virtue of service. In the great famine of 1917-18, students were challenged to help. The sons of the privileged, who could have escaped the misery and disease, went to the poorest parts of the city to be of assistance. Later the students organized a social service club. 3. Democracy and equality. All the religious and ethnic groups in Iran were represented at Alborz and were treated equally. The students learned to run the different clubs democratically according to Robert’s rules of order. In the dormitories rich and poor lived, worked, and played as equals. Each student, whether rich or poor and on scholarship, had to take turns in serving at the table. 4. Equality of women. For men to have women teachers in Iran was at best questionable. In

her English classes, Mrs. Jordan required the students to memorize the statement, “No country rises higher than the level of the women of that country,” and asked them to write a composition on it. Mrs. Boyce, wife of the vice president, helped found the first women’s magazine in Iran, *ʿĀlam-e nesvān*. 5. Love of country. Alborz was an American school but love of Iran was taught and encouraged. To the question, “Who makes Iran great?” the students would shout, “We do.” Every day in the assembly students sang patriotic songs. At a time when others in Iran were mimicking foreign architecture, Alborz revived Sasanian architecture in its buildings.

In all other schools students went home at about four P.M.; at Alborz students attended club meetings, rehearsed plays, prepared the school’s bilingual paper *Javānān-e Īrān* (“Iranian Youth,” started in 1927, the first of its kind in the country), and practiced in the fields. The students who ran these organizations later became leaders in every sector of the country, both private and public.

In 1940 the college, along with all other foreign schools, was taken over by the government; when the Allies forced Reżā Shah to abdicate a year later, there was spontaneous demand by the leaders and newspapers that the Americans be asked to come back and reopen the college, but nothing materialized.

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