



# EDUCATION V. THE MADRASA IN SHI'ITE PERSIA

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*Foundation and expansion.* After the introduction of the institutionalized *madrasa* by Neẓām-al-Molk in the late 11th century (see iv, above) Shi'ite *madrāsas* were also founded in Persia and Iraq. For example, by the mid-13th century *madrāsas* had been established in such Persian cities as Qom (eight; Calmard; Mottahedeh, pp. 179-80; Madelung, pp. 77-84; Qazvīnī, pp. 194-95; Modarresī Ṭabāṭabā'ī), Ray (seven), Kāšān (four), Āba (two), Sāva (two), and Varāmīn (two). There were also Shi'ite *madrāsas* in Sabzavār and Sārī in this period (Nakosteen, pp. 43-44; Qazvīnī, pp. 194-205). These schools were local efforts, however, and did not constitute a unitary system of education.

The Safavids declared Shi'ism the official religion of Persia at the beginning of the 16th century, and from that time on the number of Shi'ite *madrāsas* in the country grew rapidly. The most famous examples in the capital, Isfahan, were Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh and Čahār Bāg. Even after the fall of the Safavids in the 18th century Isfahan remained the most important center of learning in Persia until the end of the Qajar period. When Tehran became the Qajar capital many *madrāsas* were also built there, the most significant being Marvī (1231/1816) and Sepahsālār (1277/1860).



In modern Persia the term *madrasa* can refer to any educational institution, but for present purposes it will be limited to those schools offering Shi'ite religious training. Since 1340/1921 Qom has emerged as the major religious center in Persia, after Shaikh 'Abd-al-Karīm Ḥā'erī Yazdī founded the religious center there (Rāzī, I, pp. 1-28). In 1975 major *madrāsas* in Qom which offered religious education included Ḥaqqānī (founded 1964), the traditional Fayzīya, Kān, Ḥojjatīya, and Rażawīya, as well as Dār al-tablīg (1965), Golpāyegānī (1965), and Imam Amīr-al-Mo'menīn (1975), which incorporate some modern elements in the curricula. Since the revolution of 1979 new *madrāsas* have been founded in Qom, including Ma'ṣūmiya and Maktab-e Zahrā. (For *madrāsas* in Qom and other centers, see Fischer, pp. 81-84; Modarresī Tabāṭabā'i; Fāzel; Solṭānzāda, index; Baḵšāyeši, IV, pp. 68-88, 154-58.)

Because of insufficient data on the number of full-time and part-time religious students (*ṭollāb*), a survey of growth in *madrasa* education in the Safavid and Qajar periods is difficult. *Madrāsas* varied in size, and the overwhelming majority of what were called *madrāsas* in the sources were simply dormitories; only a relatively small number offered religious education. In Tehran in the 1860s there were thirty-five *madrāsas* with 460 students (Najm-al-Dawla, p. 363; Rochechouart, pp. 109-10); the numbers declined to thirty *madrāsas* with 210 students in 1301 Š./1922 (Šahrī, pp. 70, 86).

The available data for the period suggest that there were about 5,000 religious students in all of Persia in 1924-25, but, owing to the government's anticlerical policy, these figures dropped sharply during the reign of Reżā Shah (1925-41; [Table 1](#)). The *madrasa* made a gradual comeback in the next four decades, though it still lagged behind population growth: Between 1920 and 1979 the Persian population tripled (see [CENSUS i](#)), but enrollment in *madrāsas* only doubled. In the 1980s public and private funding was channeled into religious education, and the number of religious students again increased ([Table 2](#)).

The *ṭollāb* range in age from adolescence to middle age and occasionally even old age. In the 20th century a large number of *madrasa* students have come from rural areas, and most of those from cities have come from *bāzār* or religious families. They usually receive modest stipends from the highest religious authorities; the amounts depend upon marital status and educational level (Āqā Najafī, pp. 162-73, 292-372; Fischer, p. 81).

*Financing madrasas.* *Madrāsas* in Shi'ite Persia have generally been funded by private endowments (*awqāf*) that have rendered the schools independent of



the governing authorities (Saḥāb, pp. 51-102; cf. Mottahedeh, pp. 89-91, 147, 150, 235-36; Baḳšāyešī, IV, p. 159). In the mid-19th century Julien de Rochechouart (p. 111) recorded the budget for the Madrasa-ye Marvī as 1,600 tomans (ca. 20,000 contemporary francs), derived from rents and the income from endowments (Table 3). In addition, the school owned three houses occupied respectively by the custodian (*motawallī*) of the endowments, the leader of the prayers, and instructors. The stipends of the students averaged 11 tomans a year plus lodging, comparable to the annual stipend of 8-16 tomans (100-200 francs) for students at contemporary military schools (p. 114). Since the establishment of the religious center at Qom in the 1920s student stipends have been regularized and drawn largely from religious taxes. Table 4 shows monthly stipends of 10-100 tomans granted by six leading religious figures to students at Qom. Ayatollah Najafī Mar'āšī granted students bread coupons, rather than cash.

*Educational structure.* In the 20th-century *madrassa* system there are three main levels: introductory (*moqaddamāt*), equivalent to secular secondary school; middle (*saḥḥ*, pl. *soḥūḥ*), comprising a lower (*motawassetá*) phase and an upper (*ālī*) phase, equivalent to undergraduate university studies; and advanced (*dars-e kārej*), comparable to doctoral studies. At this level the master and students discuss various topics and argue different points of view, striving to reach new conclusions. Students take part in discussion, in a process similar to those in seminars at American universities (Fischer, pp. 63, 247-48; Mottahedeh 71-78, 89-91, 100-03).

*Curriculum and textbooks.* The core of the *madrassa* curriculum is the religious sciences (*olūm-e naqlī*), based on the Qur'ān and traditions from the Prophet and the imams; Islamic law (*feqh*); methods of deriving religious rulings (*oṣūl al-feqh*); and theology (*kalām*). The rational sciences (*olūm-e 'aqlī*), including arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and natural sciences, are marginal, except for logic and metaphysics (*ḥekmat-e elāhī* or *elāhīyāt*). Arabic grammar, philology, and syntax are also included in the introductory curriculum (for a detailed listing of classical Shī'ite studies in Persia to the beginning of the 20th century, see Blochet; Tonokābonī).

The following list includes the standard curriculum at the various levels and the textbooks used in the early 1990s. Introductory level: Arabic grammar (*ṣarfo naḥw*), 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Soyūṭī, *al-Baḥja al-marżīya fī ṣarḥ al-alfīya*, Ebn Hešām Anṣārī, *Moḡnī al-labīb*; rhetoric (*ma'ānī o bayān*), Sa'd-al-Dīn Taftāzānī, *al-Moṭawwal (Ṣarḥ Talkīṣ al-meftāḥ)*; logic (*manṭeq*), 'Abd-Allāh Yazdī, *Hāšīa*



(a commentary on Taftāzānī's *Tahdīb al-manteq*), Ḥādī Sabzavārī, *Šarḥ al-manzūma* (section on logic). Middle level: philosophy, Sabzavārī, *Šarḥ al-manzūma* (section on philosophy), *Avicenna*, *Šefā'* (section on metaphysics), Mollā Šadrā, *Asfār* (sections on soul [*nafs*] and movement [*ḥaraka*]); methods of deriving religious rulings, Ḥasan b. Zayn-al-Dīn 'Āmelī, *Ma'ālem al-oṣūl*, Mīrzā Abu'l-Qāsem Qomī, *Qawānīn al-oṣūl* I, Mortazā Anṣārī, *Ketāb-e rasā'el* (known as *Farā'ed al-oṣūl*), Moḥammad-Kāzem Ḳorāsānī, *Kefāyat al-oṣūl*; Shi'ite law, Zayn-al-Dīn 'Āmelī, *al-Rawza al-bahīya* (known as *Šarḥal-lom'a*, a commentary on Moḥammad b. Makkī al-'Ālmelī's *al-Lom'a al-demašqīya*), Anṣārī, *al-Makāseb* (on the Islamic law of commerce). Advanced level: five or ten years of analysis, commentary, debate, and discussion of two topics: methods of deriving religious rulings, based on the contents of Ḳorāsānī, *Kefāyat al-oṣūl*, and religious law, based on the contents of Moḥammad-Kāzem Yazdī's *al-'Orwat al-woṭqā* (section on divine worship, *'ebādāt*) and Anṣārī's *al-Makāseb*.

Since the 1970s two new textbooks have been adopted in some *madrasas*: for introductory logic Moḥammad-Rezā Moẓaffar's *al-Manteq* and in the first phase of the middle level his *Oṣūl al-feqh*. For a complete program of *oṣūl al-feqh* extending through both phases of the middle level, Moḥammad-Bāqer Šadr's *Derāsāt fī oṣūl al-feqh* is used. (For curriculum and books used in *madrasas* in the early 20th century, see Tonokābonī).

*Libraries.* Mosques and *madrasas* have traditionally been provided with libraries, often funded by *waqfs*. In recent decades *madrasa* libraries have proliferated. The most notable among them was assembled by Ayatollah Najafī Mar'ašī in Qom and includes more than 500,000 printed volumes, 20,000 manuscripts, and a large archive (for a detailed list of libraries, see Mowahḥed Abṭahī, pp. 286, 340-41).

*Educational method.* The *madrasa* system may best be characterized as one in which there is no grading or formal examinations and students pursue their studies solely for the sake of learning. The *madrasa* is designed to meet the intellectual needs of each individual student, according to his capacity. Courses at different levels are offered by individual instructors, and students choose their instructors. Depending upon the size of the classroom and the number of students, the instructor may sit on the carpeted floor or on a small wooden stair (*menbar*), with students seated on the floor around him. Class discussion and debate are encouraged in more advanced courses. The *madrasa* has often been criticized for not setting examinations; inadequate



guidance counseling; poor language-teaching methods; failure to update the teaching of *feqh*; the almost complete absence of mathematics, medicine, and science; the decline in teaching of philosophy and morals; and absence of a proper financial base (Fischer, p. 85).

*Postrevolutionary changes.* The revolution brought about a series of innovations in the traditional Persian *madrassa* system. First, new *madrassas* in Qom, which in the 1970s had begun to include modern social sciences and humanities in their curricula, expanded this effort after the revolution. Second, more female students have been admitted, albeit in segregated classes; Maktab al-Zahrā was founded in Qom for this purpose. Third, computers have been introduced in the Qom religious center, and the Qur'ān and Hadith have been computerized for easy reference. Fourth, *madrassas* are no longer unregulated (Fīrūzī, p. 15; for the actual rules, see *Payām-e ḥawza* 1/1, 1373 Š./1994, pp. 20-21).

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