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The Politics of Persianization in Pahlavi Iran: A Study of Kurdish Cultural Discrimination

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Abstract
Education has long been recognized as a tool for nation-building, identity formation, and promotion of cultural assimilation. In Iran, particularly during the Pahlavi era, educational policies, using linguistic standardization as a strategic tool, played a crucial role in promoting state-sponsored programs and marginalizing minority identities. The article analyzes the specific case of Iranian Kurdistan, where the tension between the state-imposed Persianization and the preservation of Kurdish culture has been particularly pronounced. Employing a descriptive-analytical method, the study draws on primary sources including archival documents such as the *Salnāme Ma'aref Amoozesh Kurdistan* [Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education] (1316 Sh./1937)[1] and personal memoirs. The analysis provides a comprehensive overview on the historical background of language policies in Iran, case studies from Kurdistan, the impact on societal dynamics, and the broader implications for linguistic identity.

Keywords
Kurdistan / Reżā Šāh / state-building / new schools / educational policies

1 - Introduction

The first Constitution of Iran in 1906 marked Persian as the official language for all Iranians, coupled with a requirement that members of parliament be proficient in Persian (Kia 1998). The Supplementary Fundamental Laws of 1907 extended this mandate to include compulsory education in Persian. However, these policies were only fully enforced with the centralization of the government in Tehran. Reza Shah [Reżā Šāh]'s[2] rule from 1925 to 1941 sought to centralize Iran and impose Persian as the exclusive language of education, administration, and media (Bani-Shoraka 2002; Hassanpour

1 In this research, the abbreviation "Sh." refers to the Persian Solar Hijri calendar. All dates marked with "Sh." are accompanied by their corresponding dates in the Gregorian calendar.

2 The transliteration system used in this paper is that of the DMG (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft).

1992:126; Jahani 2002). The approach aimed to unify the nation under a monolingual identity, reflective of the ideology that one nation equates to one language.

The intricate relationship between language policies and education is emphasized by Michael A. K. Halliday (2007:220), who posits that while societies and governments may not overtly address language policy, decisions about language use in schools are crucial. To clarify the extent to which school education in Iran can be considered a point of crystallization for the nation-state, it is essential to examine the broader connection between schools and the nation-state. The narratives of the nation and the construction of Iran were based on theories held by Iranian scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For example, Sadiq[3] (1973:84) argued that the purpose of the education system was to provide students with cultural capital that would enable Iran to enter the era of modernity as a powerful contender in the region. He proposed a nationalistic education system also based on the principles of progressive education with a strong base of scientific and technical knowledge. To cite his words:

> It follows that an educational program must be built upon the following aims: (1) to create in the minds of the people a living consciousness of the past by showing the great achievements of the race; […] (2) to train boys and girls to become good citizens of modern Persia; […] (4) to teach the rural and the tribes how to live, […] make a home, […] prepare food and clothing, […] prevent disease (Sadiq 1973:85).

According to Sadiq, rural and tribal peoples were considered an obstacle to modernity. His solution to traditionalism in Iran was to teach and resocialize Iranian students and citizens based on new concepts of "self" in modernity and on the culture of the Persian "race".

Focusing on the evolution of language policies in Iran, specifically the suppression and controlled tolerance of minority languages such as Kurdish, this study aims to explore the impact of these policies on education, societal dynamics, and linguistic identity. Reza Shah's era was marked by the forceful assimilation of non-Persian ethnic groups, leading to the exclusion of their languages from education and public discourse. Despite this, the Kurdish community clandestinely produced Kurdish materials in the 1940s to combat linguistic marginalization (Hassanpour 1996:55). This study focuses on Reza Shah's period, while also noting that his successor, Mohammad Reza Shah

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3 Isa Sadiq Alam (1894-1978) was a writer, educator, and cultural figure. He played a crucial role in modernizing Iran's education system, founding the University of Tehran, and coining new Persian terms. He held various political positions, including Minister of Culture and senator, and contributed significantly to the development of modern Iranian culture and language (Catanzaro 2014:37-54).

[Moḥammad Reżā Šāh], permitted the limited use of minority languages within specific, state-controlled settings, thereby maintaining the dominance of Persian.[4]

In this research, the primary focus involves the southern region of West Azerbaijan Province, particularly the cities within the historical area referred to as Kurdistan. While acknowledging that most Kurds live in the Kurdistan provinces of Kermanshah and the southern parts of West Azarbaijan, the geographical scope is intentionally limited to some cities of these provinces. Specifically, the term "Kurdistan" in this context encompasses towns such as Savojbolagh Makri (Mahabad) and the cities within the present-day Kurdistan Province. Additionally, some cities in Kermanshah Province, including Paveh, Javanroud, and Ravansar, which were considered districts of Sanandaj city in the geographical divisions of that era, are also included in the scope of this research (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:154). By narrowing the geographical focus to this specific area, the research can provide in-depth insights into the language policies and their impact on the linguistic and cultural fabric of these regions during the first Pahlavi period, from Reza Shah's takeover in 1921 until 1939, shortly before his abdication in 1941.

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This approach adopts a descriptive-analytical method within a defined and relevant context, drawing on both primary and secondary sources for a comprehensive and precise understanding of the historical developments in this particular area. Primary sources include archival documents such as the *Salnāme Ma'aref Amoozesh Kurdistan* (1316 Sh./1937) produced by the Yearbook Center of Shahpur High School in Sanan-

4 Controlled tolerance emerged as the underlying policy, permitting non-Persian minorities to use their languages at home and in communities, but lacked full linguistic human rights protection, causing language loss. Persian elites continued marginalizing these languages as "regional dialects" (Hayati & Mashhadi 2010:27).

daj under the Pahlavi-era Ministry of Education. Organized into sections that document various aspects of the high school and educational landscape in Kurdistan – such as reports on faculty, student activities, associations, and descriptions of local culture and geography – the yearbook aimed to present the region's educational achievements and cultural life, providing a meaningful historical snapshot of the period. This edition, accessed digitally through the *Ketābkhāne-ye Markazi Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān* [The Central Library of the University of Tehran], offers insights into both the institutional and cultural dimensions of the time. Regarding broader sociopolitical dynamics underpinning education in Kurdistan, such as linguistic and ethnic policies and their impact on schooling, most existing studies offer fragmented information. Among them, the most comprehensive work is *The History of Education in Kurdistan* by Heyrat Sajadi, which relies exclusively on archival documents. Earlier sources, at best, also appear to have drawn solely from these archival materials. This research references archival documents, although direct access to the originals was not achieved. Consequently, the decision to highlight specific passages from Dehghani, Karimi & Rasouli became essential due to the limited access to these archival sources. Additionally, personal memoirs – namely *Çêştî Micêwir* [The Verger's Hotchpotch] by Hejar Mukriyanî (1921-1990) and *Tarîk û Rûn* [Twilight] by Hêmin (1921-1986), which are published in Sorani, are also considered.

The subsequent paragraphs are structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the era's educational reforms and language policies. Paragraph 2 outlines the historical progression of educational reforms from the constitutional era to the rise of Reza Shah, emphasizing the shift towards centralization. Paragraph 3 explores the implementation of these policies in Kurdistan, examining their impact on the Kurdish linguistic and cultural landscape. Paragraph 4 evaluates the socio-political consequences of these reforms, while the final section discusses the enduring legacy of these policies in contemporary societal dynamics and identity formation in Iran. Each section aims to illuminate the complexities of linguistic nationalism and its effects on minority communities within a nation-state framework.

2 - The New School Movement, 1870-1906

Between 1870 and 1906, education became increasingly central to the broader reform efforts of the late 19th century. Previously, education was vital for promoting centralization and improving administrative capabilities, typically focusing on military technologies, sciences, and training elite military and administrative groups. However, during this period, education began to be viewed as a key solution to social and political challenges. Reformers saw educating the populace as essential for societal and political transformations, shifting the focus from merely training officials to fostering widespread literacy. The link between a literate population and the nation's strength and

prosperity became apparent, making the nation itself, rather than just the governmental bodies, the target of educational reforms (Ringer 1998:145). Iranian rulers, recognizing the need for substantial change, looked to Western models of modernization, like those in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, to inspire their reforms.

A diverse group of individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds agreed on the necessity of educational reform and actively participated in the efforts to bring about change. Educational reformers, driven by a shared vision for progress, took the initiative to establish European-style schools in Tehran, Tabriz, and other major cities.[5] In addition, a number of educational activists formed a society for the promulgation of education in Iran, the *Anjoman-e Ma'aref* in 1898, an event which marked a fundamental departure from the past reliance on government reform initiatives (Ringer 1998:146).[6]

The "public" was engaged in the reform debate from two perspectives: as beneficiaries of educational initiatives aiming for widespread literacy and as the audience for reform-driven Iranian journals published abroad in the late 1890s.[7] Simultaneously, the interest in an European-style education surged with increasing demand. For the first time, the impetus for change came not only from high-ranking officials but also from grassroots demand for European educational methods among urban dwellers.

Recognizing the imperative for reform, particularly in education, the intelligentsia supported the establishment of the *madrās-e jadid* or *new school* as essential tools for progress. Contextually, religious delegations arriving in Iran established schools,[8] some of which evolved into public educational institutions, aligning with the constitutional provisions (Arasteh 1969; Marashi 2011). However, despite initial progress, the expansion of the *madrās -e jadid* has faced significant challenges, primarily financial constraints and political entanglements among education reform advocates. While the Supplementary Fundamental Laws in 1907, particularly Articles 18 and 19, outlined

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5 Haj Mirza Hassan Roshdiyye, the first modern elementary school teacher in Iran, son of a prominent religious figure, recognized inefficiencies in traditional education methods. After learning about modern teaching techniques in Beirut, he returned to Tabriz in 1889 to establish a school (Roshdiyyyeh 1991:156).

6 "Anjoman-e Maʿāref". *Encyclopaedia Iranica.* iranicaonline.org/articles/anjoman-e-maaref. Last accessed 16/01/2025.

7 Social critics published their ideas in the hope of arousing public interest in childhood education. These newspapers were generally published by liberal Iranians who were dissatisfied with conditions in Iran. The most important newspapers were *Hablul-matin* [Solid Code], published in India, *Qanun* [The Law] in London and *Akhiar* [Star] in Istanbul (Aresteh 1969:50).

8 For example, in 1860, the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) was founded by Parisian Jews with the motto "To work everywhere for the emancipation and moral progress of the Jewish world". The Alliance was the first foreign Jewish organization to offer education to Iranian Jews and had the longest duration, operating in Iran for over 80 years, starting in 1898 (Rodrigue 1993:7). To learn more about the beginnings of the AIU in Iran, see Nategh 2014.

state obligations in the field of education,[9] limited resources and government disengagement hindered progress:[10] «As a result, the majority of the population, particularly those who lacked financial means, remained excluded from the benefits of formal education, perpetuating a cultural divide across the country» (Beheshti Sarshast 2015:34).

Prior to the coup d'état of 1921, the educational landscape reflected these challenges, with access to education mainly limited to the provincial capitals and available primarily to the children of the nobility and the wealthy classes. In 1921, during the country's period of relative peace post-coup d'état, the parliament approved the formation of the Higher Council of Education, giving the Department of Education executive supervision of schools. Political stability bolstered support for modern educational institutions, significantly advancing reforms that promoted official nationalism as «the embodiment of national culture and promoting a sense of shared authenticity across the educational system» (Beheshti Sarshast 2015:34).

This policy sought to establish a national identity rooted in monolingualism, reinforcing the ideology that equated linguistic uniformity with national unity. As Ali-Asghar Hekmat [ʿAlī Asghar Ḥekmat], one of the principal architects of this policy, describes in his memoirs, his mission was to make Iran of one cloth (Ḥekmat 1976). This new pedagogical mission could be carried out more efficiently through the establishment of compulsory, public, and free elementary schools.

3 - Persian and the Monolingual Habitus

Iran's national identity has been marked by complexity, stemming from the inclusion of various ethnicities, languages, territories, religions, and sects within its borders. This diversity has led to competing articulations of nationalism, each emphasizing different aspects of Iranian identity. The process of creating a homogenous identity and fashioning a collective conscience began with the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. During this period, an Iranian identity was invented, internalized by the masses, and subsequently became real and self-fulfilling.

The issue of ethno-nationalism rose to prominence in Iranian politics as a result of these efforts. «Despite the deep involvement of ethnic factions in the constitutional revolution the problem which quickly arose was the fact that the term 'national' was consistently interpreted as denoting Persianness, rather than any attempt to offer

9 Art. XVIII: All individuals are eligible to pursue the study of science, arts, and crafts, except as limited by religious law. Art. XIX: The government must establish schools at its own expense and support and administer them through a Ministry of Science and the Arts, later renamed the Ministry of Education (Arasteh 1969:135).

10 «Meetings were convened in certain cases, but these were mere words, with little tangible progress. Financial woes and government disengagement left public schools in a state of indebtedness and uncertainty» (Dolatabadi 1993:206).

a wider Iranian nation identity» (Abrahamian 1982:127).[11] The generation of intellectuals from the constitutional momentum drew inspiration from ideals of social egalitarianism, liberalism, and romantic territorial nationalism to drive reform efforts across the country. In the aftermath of World War One, the intelligentsia, intent on forging modern, centralized states, increasingly embraced political authoritarianism, linguistic unity, and cultural nationalism as powerful instruments to realize their visions.

> Despite variations in political views, what set them [the intelligentsia] apart from their predecessors was their adherence to the European model of society, which emphasized a coherent entity organized around the concepts of nation and state. They firmly believed that a strong centralized government was necessary for implementing reforms while safeguarding the nation's territorial integrity (Atabaki 2014:221).

The cultural elite in Iran advocated for a low degree of cultural diversity and a high degree of ethnic homogeneity as prerequisites for modernization and state-building. Reza Shah's centralizing policies and modernization efforts during his twenty-year rule (1921-1941) were partly a response to these intellectual demands. Figures like Hossein Kazemzadeh, Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, and Mahmoud Afshar influenced these policies, significantly altering Iran's traditional social and political terrain. Intellectuals recognized the historical significance of the Persian language in unifying the nation and fostering patriotic sentiment, a view reinforced by the "Berlin Circle"[12] (Atabaki 2014:221).

The Berlin Circle left a lasting impact on its contemporaries and subsequent generations of Iranian historians and elites. For instance, Afshar played a fundamental role in promoting the Persian language to foster national unity in Iran, advocating for its spread through education and political initiatives like *Pan-Iranism*.[13] His role as the editor of *Ayandeh* also positioned him as a key intellectual force behind these cultural

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11 Mana Kia (2020) invites readers to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Persian identity and culture, highlighting their resilience and adaptability in the face of historical transformations. On the same topic, see also Saleh & Worrall 2015.

12 The Berlin Circle was a prominent intellectual collective active from 1915 to the mid-1920s, significantly shaping modern Iranian nationalism and political culture. Its members were deeply influenced by the intellectual and political milieu of interwar Germany. They contributed extensively through influential Persian-language periodicals such as *Kaveh*, *Iranshahr*, and *Nameh-ye Farangestan* (Matin-Asgari 2024).

13 Mahmud Afshar Yazdi (1893-1983) started his career in the Iranian Ministry of Justice, held various roles in the Ministries of Finance and Culture. In 1925, he founded the influential journal *Ayandeh*, which played a key role in promoting national unity and the Persian language (Ghahari 2001: 77-85).

transformations. In the inaugural edition of *Ayandeh*, Afshar clarified what he meant by Iranian national unity in «Our Ideal: Our National Unity». His concept of national unity had two components: political independence and territorial integrity. Among the measures he recommended were forced migration or relocation of communities to areas such as Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Baluchistan, where he perceived the presence of multiple languages as a potential threat to Iran's national unity (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2015:82; Mohammadpour 2024:10).

Alongside him, Ahmad Kasravi[14] firmly advocated the necessity of a shared language and communal practices to support political, geographical, and social integration. His vision was exemplified by the motto of his first non-political journalistic endeavor, the magazine *Peymān*: "One Goal, One Religion, One Language." Published in Tehran from November 1933 to June 1942, *Peymān* combined scholarly content with public discourse and was known for its critical tone on Persian literary heritage, religious superstitions, and European culture, which drew both censorship and public opposition. As Kasravi would later elaborate in *Zabān-e Pāk* (1943), he ardently desired «the dissolution of numerous languages such as Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, and the regional dialects (*nim-zabanha*) of the provinces, i.e., Gilaki, Kurdish, Lori, in favor of a singular Persian language».

Attempts to celebrate Iran's linguistic and cultural diversity were suppressed in favor of promoting a monolithic identity. The Pahlavi monarchs' policies aimed at enforcing linguistic uniformity among marginalized local languages and cultures, leading to the dominance of Persian. This dominance resulted in superstrate influence, whereby Persian, as the prestigious and politically dominant language, gradually altered the grammatical structures, phonetics, and vocabulary of minority languages through sustained contact.[15]

3.1 - Negotiating Belonging

Throughout the 20th century, Iran's identity has been shaped by a complex interplay between Islamic and nationalist discourses. This dynamic has led to a profound discrepancy in the nation's self-understanding, rooted in a historical tension between

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14 Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946) was born in 1890 in Ḥokmāvār, a poor suburb of Tabriz, into a family of religious functionaries. Kasravi became involved in the Constitutional Revolution in Tabriz at the age of 16 and openly criticized the Shiʿite clergy who opposed the movement. He founded the magazine *Peymān* and authored several works criticizing Persian mysticism and promoting linguistic and cultural reforms. ("Kasravi Ahmad". *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kasravi-ahmad-i. Last accessed 16/01/2025).

15 Superstrate influence arises when a dominant language affects a subordinate one, often due to conquerors or elites. Iran showcases superstrate influence, where Persian, as the prestigious language, impacts minority languages. A dominant language affects a weaker one, altering structure and vocabulary (Jahani 2005:151; Nasiri & Radniri & Zandi 2015; Pakpour 2015).

modern nationalism and the glorification of pre-Islamic heritage, which is consistently portrayed as the authentic source of Iranian identity or Iranianness; Zia-Ebrahimi (2016:2) has termed this «dislocative nationalism». The myth of the golden age of Persia before Islam is the core of modern Iranian nationalism, which presumes the notion of Iran tied to a specific territory, a specific sense of self, and a knowledge of former greatness. This discourse was adopted during the Pahlavi era, with extensive use of this ancient past not only to enhance the prestige of the monarchical system but also to reinforce a sense of Iranian nationalism. Persian nationalism also entailed the adoption of anti-Islamic and "anti-other" sentiments and attempted to premise the people's identity on Persian culture and language as the modern embodiment of the glorious ancient Persian past (Saleh & Worrall 2015:74), articulating Iranianness as Persianness.

To understand the roots of this nationalistic perspective, one can look back at the writings of early nationalists such as Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh [Mirza Fathʿalī Akhundzadeh] and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani. These thinkers characterized Islam as an Arab religion inherently incompatible with Iranian identity and values. Emblematic is Akhundzadeh's most significant work (1865[2016]), a fictional account of a conversation between Kamal, the Indian who represents Akhundzadeh, and Jalal, an Iranian who speaks for Akhundzadeh's audience. Kamal laments the loss of Persias paradise afterthe invasion of Muslim Arabs, attributing its destruction to the «barbarous, naked-arse, lizard-eating, barefoot Arabs» (Akhundzadeh 1865[2016]). In the same vein, Arabic was considered an inferior language that corrupted Persian after the Muslim invasion. Akhundzadeh's central themes are the demonization of Arabs and the dismissal of Iran's diverse cultures before and after Islam. He describes Iranian identity as a constellation of language, race, and a unique soul (Mohammadpour 2024:8). Premised on the epistemic privilege of the Persian language, a selective remembrance of the past, and the forging of an "internal Other," a raciolinguistic ideology equated Persianness with Iranianness and naturalized Persian as both a language and a race (Mohammadpour 2024:3). Over the course of a century, elites and the state have jointly sought to naturalize Persianness as the "default identity" to be imposed on non-Persians in Iran.

The politics of language and education in Pahlavi Iran intersect with broader discussions of ethnic nationalism and the politics of belonging. In the historical construction of Persianness through the lens of Eurocentrism and Orientalism in the late 19th century, its meaning has transcended a mere sense of belonging, rendering it a privileged mode of existence, analogous to Whiteness in the context of Western cultures. Iranian nationalists created an "Internal Orient" by erasing the ethnoreligious and linguistic differences in Iran.[16]

16 Leila Rahimi Bahmany (2024) discusses how the cultural othering of non-Persians is manifested through economic and political oppression and cultural exclusion. This is particularly

Kamran Matin (2022:1) refers to «inter-subaltern colonialism», which interested countries with a semi-colonial past, such as Iran and Turkey, as a systematic violence against stateless cultures and populations that are ideologically otherized and subordinated to a dominant culture at the singular stream of national identity. The reconstruction of stateless peoples, "the subaltern", within their territory as "ethnic minorities" results in their being ontologically securitized and hence subjected to politico-cultural destruction, assimilation, or subordination, as well as economic exploitation, resource extraction, and environmental degradation.[17]

Given this context, the school could be interpreted (specifically within its pedagogical implementation) as a quintessential institution of the nation-state. The institution functions as an operative mechanism of (re)production, primarily by delineating a national-ethnocultural «we» and «not-we» (Mecheril 2003:129). Schools not only absorb and transmit social norms of inclusion and exclusion but also play a significant role in generating outsider identities by categorizing its subjects along national-ethnocultural boundaries.

Ultimately, educational policies played a crucial role in promoting the official ideology of the Pahlavi state. These policies were implemented through educational curricula, state symbols, propaganda, and sanctioned historiography: «The ideology was ingrained in the educational system for over fifty years, shaping the beliefs and values of successive generations» (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016:219).

4 - A Brief Look at the Progress of Modern Education in Kurdistan

Until the end of the 20th century, Kurdistan's education system was centered around *maktabkhuneha* ("religious schools") and private tutoring at home. Religious schools were dedicated to students of religious sciences, while private tutoring, known as *sar-khaneh*, was less common. At the *maktabkhuneha*, the curricula focused on religious rules, Quran reading, and Arabic grammar, along with classical texts such as

evident in the treatment of languages such as Azeri Turkish, whose use has been regarded as a personal malady or contagion, posing a threat to social cohesion and Iran's integrity. By arguing that non-Persian literary production challenges these dominant norms and promotes linguistic and literary diversity, Rahimi Bahmany proposes a path to linguistic and cultural diversity.

17 Afshin Matin-Asgari's analysis of the 2022-23 protest movement in Iran (2024), highlighted by the globally resonant slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," draws attention to the complex challenge of defining minoritized communities within the nation. During the uprising, the recognition of these complexities and the issues of national oppression became a central theme, reflecting a dynamic interplay between historical influences and contemporary political movements. Despite resistance from nationalist political factions and some academics, the acknowledgment of national oppression as a critical issue by both the Islamic Republic and its opposition marks a significant outcome of the protests.

the *Golestān* and *Būstān* by Saadi. These institutions did not follow a uniform teaching method and did not operate under government supervision. Moreover, as Heyrat Sajadi noted, «the teaching methods and curricula of these schools remained unchanged for many years, with little regard for international educational developments» (Beheshti Sarshast 2015:36). These schools, often located in mosques or other community spaces like *takaya* "sufi lodges") and teachers' homes, were independently run with support from scholars and religious leaders. Teachers were usually students of religious sciences and operated without government supervision (Qasemi Pouya 1998:45). Heyrat Sajadi describes how instruction involved students assisting the teacher, the *mamusta* ("teacher"), with a notable student sometimes helping teach. Heyrat Sajadi describes how instruction in traditional Kurdish schools involved students assisting the *mamusta*, with a particularly capable student sometimes taking on teaching responsibilities. The *khalifah*, acting as the teacher's assistant, played a crucial role in organizing the school's activities and maintaining discipline. Students from these centers often went on to hold important roles in educational and administrative affairs (Beheshti Sarshast 2015:35). Additionally, tribal chiefs and landlords frequently employed a *mirza*—a literate individual trained under religious scholars—to manage correspondence and to educate the chief's children in reading and writing at home (Motablebi 2021:272). Based on 1956 census data detailed in UNESCO's 1964 publication *Īrānšahr* edited by Ali-Asghar Hekmat [ʿAlī Asghar Ḥekmat], Sanandaj, a city within Kurdistan province, stood out as a significant regional hub with a city population of 40,641 and a surrounding village population of 226,052, totaling 266,693. This figure starkly contrasted with Saqqez, another prominent area in the province, which had a population of just 12,729. Sanandaj's larger population reflected its prominence relative to other Kurdish cities, which contributed to its development as an educational center. However, despite this demographic advantage, Sanandaj and Kurdistan as a whole remained economically marginalized from the central powerhouses of Iran. Analysis by Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou in *Le Kurdistan Iranien* (1977), supported by accounts from ʿAlī Aṣghar Shamīm Hamadānī (1933) and the *Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* (1937), indicates that Kurdistan, including Sanandaj, was one of Iran's least developed regions during the first Pahlavi era. With a population density of only 1.7 people per square kilometer and a strong reliance on agriculture, the region experienced minimal industrial activity and limited infrastructure development, including a lack of significant railways and modern roads. This underdevelopment underscored Kurdistan's peripheral status within Iran's national economic landscape and likely influenced its slow integration into the modern educational system.

By 1938 (1307 Sh.), Kurdistan had 41 active *maktabkhuneha* with 550 students (Sākma, 297/10251, p. 6, in Motalebi 2021). Over time, the *maktabkhaneh* system began to phase out, though it continued to exist in a limited form in subsequent periods.

Following the Shah's educational reforms, traditional religious *maktab-khaneh* were replaced by *madrās-e jadid* (modern schools), which introduced a structured curriculum taught in Persian, now established as the national language of Iran (Motalebi 2021:271). With a trend that had already begun at the end of the 19th century, it is essential not to overlook that in Kurdistan, the success of the *madrās -e jadid* was mainly associated with religious minorities. Indeed, in 1892, the Chaldean Christian community pioneered the founding of a *new school* in Sanandaj, playing a crucial role in educating Christian youth and offering educational services to the children of the Muslim city elite[18] (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:154; *Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:24). As well, the Alliance Israélite Universelle first *new school* opened in 1903, served the Iranian Jewish community (Eshaghian & Cohen 2008:229; *Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:24).[19]

The spread of the *madrās -e jadid* during this period was characterized by a promising a start after challenges and premature closures, leading to a gradual increase in educational institutions. In 1908, the *Maʿrefat* school was founded with the help of Fath al-Molk Ardalan and an individual called Maʿrefat , but closed after only a year. In the same period, a school was opened under the patronage of the governor of Kurdistan, but closed after seven months with the governor's departure (*Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:25). After a six-year-hiatus (Motalebi 2021:271), in 1914, the *Aḥmadīya* school was opened, definitively marking the beginning of *āmūzesh -e novin* ("modern education"), in Kurdistan (*Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:25-26).Until that time, new educational institutions were concentrated exclusively in Sanandaj, while other cities had not yet access to such opportunities. The first school in Saqqez, *Aḥmadīya*, was founded in 1917 by a group of local businessmen, but closed in 1919 (Motalebi 2021:273; *Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:27). In 1918, Hāji Ṭāsir al-Islām founded the *Ettehad* school in Sanandaj[20] (*Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:25). On the eve of the coup, Kurdistan had only four schools in operation, all located in Sanandaj.[21]

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18 The school was located in the Chaldean neighborhood of Sanandaj with exeptional teachers since its inception. In addition to teaching Persian, mathematics, history, geography, and Persian grammar, they also taught French and Chaldean. In 1928, the name of the Chaldean Elementary School was changed to Pahlavi Elementary School (*Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:24).

19 The Alliance School was renamed *Ettehad*. In addition to the usual subjects, French and Hebrew were also taught, and inspectors from the Alliance occasionally visited the school (*Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:24).

20 This school was renamed *Hedayat* in 1935 (1314 Sh.), its location was the former site of *Aḥmadīya* Elementary School (*Yearbook of the Kurdistan Ministry of Education* 1937:24).

21 The *Ettehad* School and *Aḥmadīya* School were state-funded *dowlati* ("public"), subject to the Ministry of Education's oversight. On the other hand, the Alliance School and Chaldean School

With the opening of the *Aḥmadīya* in Saqqez and the Alliance school in Bijar, the total number of schools in Kurdistan reached seven by 1924.

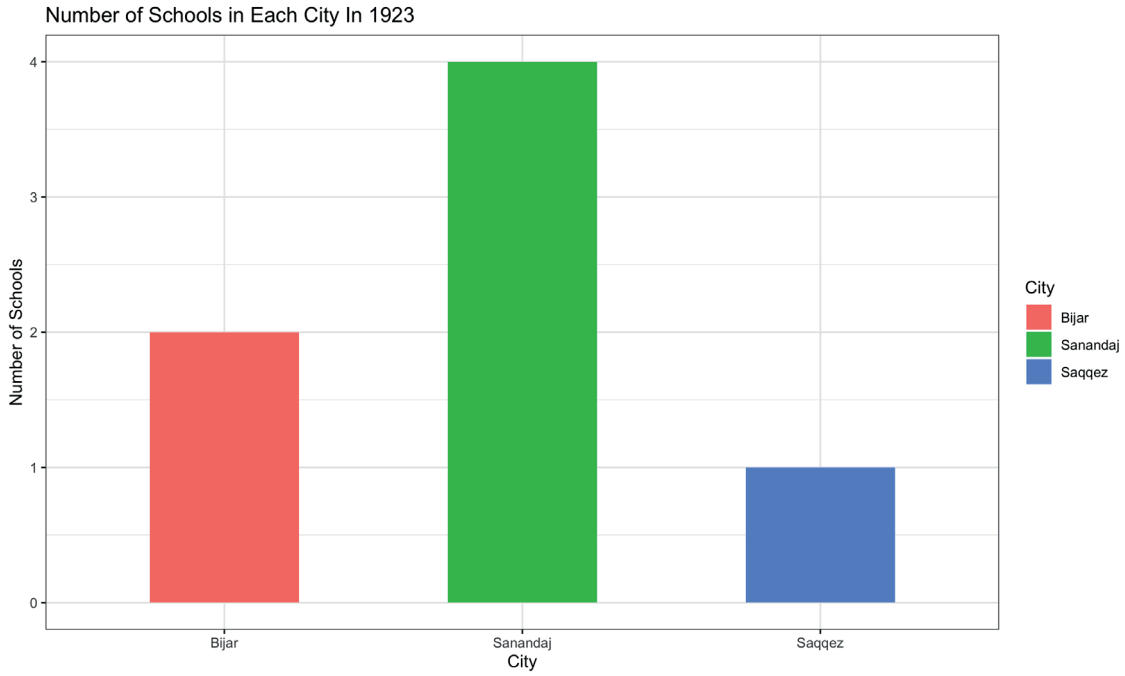

Figure 1- Number of Schools in Kurdish Cities in 1923. Created by the author using data from primary sources detailed in the bibliography.

The bar charts (Figures 1 and 2) indicate that Sanandaj, benefiting from state support and the presence of religious minority schools such as *Ettehad*, *Aḥmadīya*, the Alliance, and Chaldean, had the highest number of students and schools, making it a central educational hub. It had four schools, while Bijar and Saqqez had two and one, respectively. This concentration of educational opportunities in Sanandaj was due to early governmental supervision, funding, and the additional support from minority schools, which together fostered its development as compared to other regions like Bijar and Saqqez. These contextual details from the various policies suggest that the observed growth in schools and student numbers was driven by government efforts to centralize education, promote a unified Iranian identity, and support state-building objectives through strategic educational funding and linguistic standardization.

were categorized as *melli* ("national"), associated with religious minorities (Motalebi 2021). In the early 20th century, Iranian Muslims initiated privately funded *jadid* or *melli* schools, which were open to children from diverse economic backgrounds. These schools were established by individuals rather than religious minorities or missionaries and emphasized private over state sponsorship. This development highlighted a significant disconnection between the Qajar state and reformers, with private initiatives, rather than state effort, leading the educational reforms (Ringer 1998).

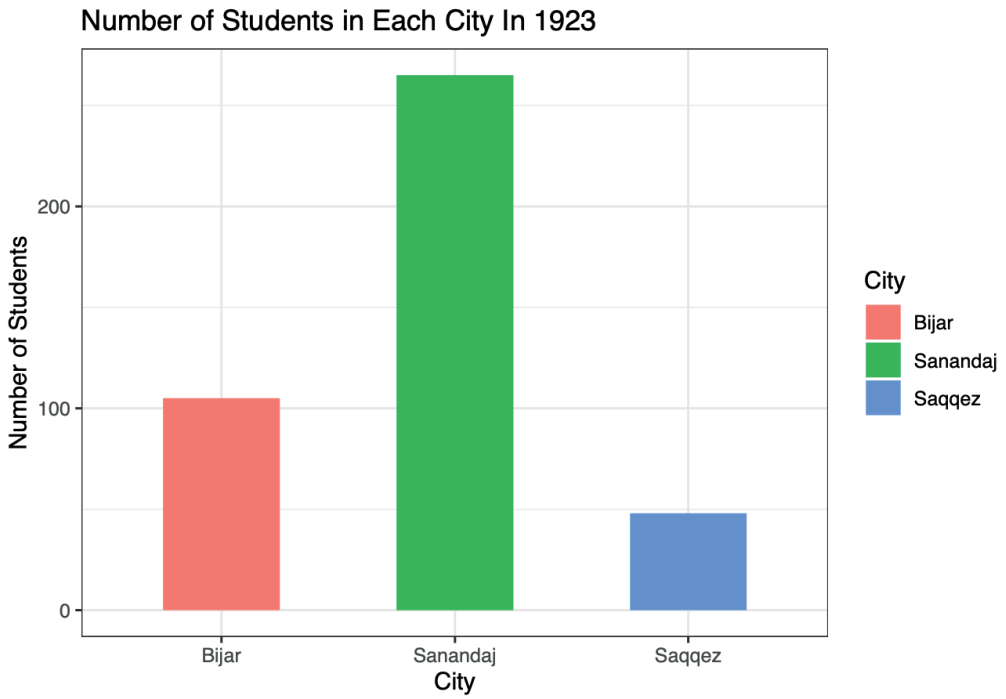

Figure 2 - Number of Students in Each City in 1923. Created by the author using data from primary sources detailed in the bibliography.

4.1 - Education and Military Intervention: Shaping the Nation-State in Iran

To critically assess the role of school education in Iran under Reza Shah as a key factor in nation-state consolidation, it is essential to examine the interplay between educational expansion and the State's political objectives. The creation of new schools during the period under Reza Shah was not just part of the Pahlavi administration's national consolidation efforts but was closely linked to broader political and military strategies aimed at controlling ethnically and geographically peripheral regions. The dual role of education – as both a cultural and coercive tool – highlights the power dynamics and temporality at play.

The significant increase in the education budget in 1926, targeting «provinces and regions, especially border territories such as Azerbaijan, Khuzestan, and Kurdistan» (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2015:83-85), underlines the strategic importance of these areas. Education in border regions was regarded as more than just an educational necessity; but as a fundamental part in the State's broader efforts to ensure security and stability. Documents from this period reveal that the urgency to establish schools in Kurdistan, particularly in the nomadic area of Hawraman, was driven not only by the need to modernize education but also as part of the State's strategy to maintain control. The military's direct involvement in these educational initiatives challenges the notion

of education as merely a development tool and exposes its use as a means of control.

Education played a crucial role in the Pahlavi administration's strategy to assert control over unstable, ethnically diverse regions such as Kurdish territories and Khuzestan. This strategy is underscored by directives from Reza Shah's Imperial Office in 1935, which mandated the rapid establishment of schools in strategic locations including Savojbolagh Makri (now Mahabad). These directives, accompanied by significant increases in funding—an additional 320,000 tomans for 1935 and 1936—highlight the dual use of education for both cultural assimilation and military dominance. The strong involvement of military institutions complicates the legacy of these educational policies, revealing them as part of a broader state consolidation project based not only on cultural assimilation but also on coercive power (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:159).

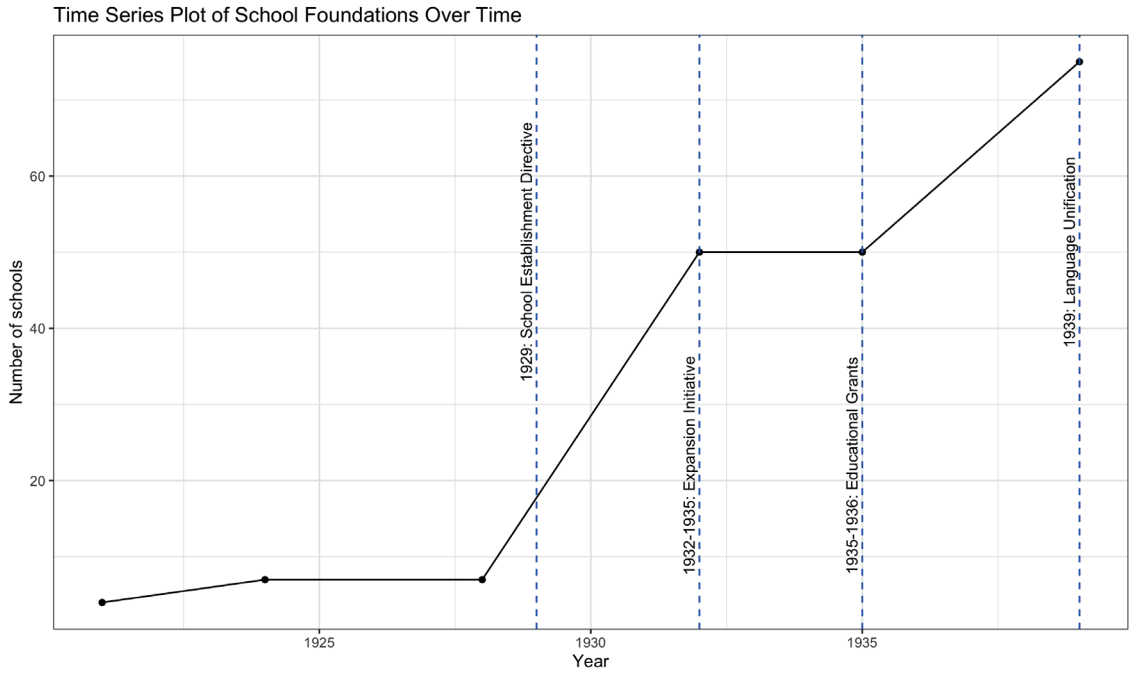

Figure 3 - Time Series of School Foundations Over Time. Created by the author using data from primary sources detailed in the bibliography.

4.2 - The Monolithic Education System in Kurdistan and its Role in Linguistic Hegemony

The education system in Kurdistan has played a crucial role in reinforcing Iran's linguistic hegemony, shaped by the "one nation = one language" ideology, which mirrors Western nation-state constructs. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:319) notes, «Iran's lan-

guage policy has been profoundly influenced by the 'one nation = one language' myth, reflecting the tenets of Western nation-state ideology». Gellner and Bünning (1995:56, 61) highlight how national identities are crafted via state education, employing a standardized language to foster a homogeneous high culture, functioning as «a kind of common conceptual currency». Moreover, Mojab and Hassanpour (1995:231) criticize the era's educational and media outputs as vehicles for disseminating «racist and nationalistic myths,» suppressing cultural diversity and enforcing Persian language dominance. This monolithic approach not only restricted local languages and dialects in Kurdistan but also throughout Iran, emphasizing Persian literacy at the expense of linguistic diversity (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:161).

In 1929, the Head of the Department of Education issued a directive to schools, ordering all staff to «diligently promote the proliferation of the Persian language» (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:161). The directive emphasized that both teachers and students should exclusively use the Persian language within school premises. In regions such as Kurdistan, attempts were made, whenever possible, to employ non-native teachers unfamiliar with the Kurdish language. The approach aimed to force all residents to adopt the use of Persian. In 1932, a confidential letter from the governor of Kurdistan to the Ministry of the Interior outlined a strategic proposal for the future. He stressed the imperative of establishing numerous schools in urban centers and districts, sending teachers from central areas. The goal was to ensure that basic education made students completely unfamiliar with the Kurdish language (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2015:80).

The imposition of Persian as the medium of instruction, even in the early school years, introduced significant challenges. Not only did it complicate understanding and learning, but also caused students' aversion to school. Hêmin Mokriāni,[22] a Kurdish intellectual and poet influential in the political scene post-Reza Shah regime, described his first school day as profoundly distressing. He recounts how his teacher, speaking only in Persian, used words that were entirely foreign to him. Hêmin reflected on his educational experiences, noting, «The days were marked by forced participation, driven by necessity and coercion» (Hêmin 1974:6). In their memoirs, prominent Kurdish poets and writers recount similar stories of both physical and symbolic violence, endured not only for writing in Kurdish but also for owning books and periodicals in the language

22 Hêmin was the pen name of Muhammad Amin Sheikholeslami (1921-86) and Hejar was the pen name of Abdurrahman Sharafkandi (1921-91). Hêmin and Hejar are celebrated figures in Kurdish literature, known not only for their evocative poetry but also for their memoirs, which hold a special place in Kurdish literary circles. Their works encapsulate the enduring tradition of the "wandering poets", whose life stories and creative expressions are steeped in the experiences of displacement and the search for identity within the Kurdish political and cultural landscape (Bozarslan & Gunes & Yadirgi 2021).

(Noori 2006; Salih 2007, in Sheyholislami 2012:27).

The rigorous enforcement of Persian language use in schools, as it has been described, sets the stage for understanding the practical challenges of implementing these monolingual policies. In 1928, the Ministry of Education undertook the ambitious initiative to establish compulsory public education throughout the country. However, the implementation of this policy encountered various obstacles in Kurdistan (Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:164). First of all, among the obstacles was the issue of financing. During the Pahlavi era and particularly during the first decade of Reza Shah's rule, financial restrictions continued to pose a significant obstacle to the establishment of additional schools and the hiring of new educators. In a direct and confidential note dated 1934, the Kurdistan Department of Education addressed the Ministry of Education emphasized the unique linguistic nature of the Kurdistan population. Only a few individuals, especially educators from cities and towns, had adequate proficiency in the Persian language. The Ministry of Education firmly decreed: «Under no circumstances will Kurdish educators and staff be appointed within the educational institutions of Kurdistan. Those who are currently employed must be transferred to other regions outside Kurdistan» (Sākma, 297/24658, in Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2015:87).

In a report submitted by the Bijar Department of Education to the Ministry of Education in the month of Tir of the year 1310 Sh./1931, the negative impact of the use of non-native teachers on reducing student enrollment was widely highlighted. The report highlighted that a significant factor behind this phenomenon was the use of Sunni and Kurdish-speaking teachers in regions predominantly populated by Shia and Turkish-speaking communities. Another example: «The decline in the number of students in the primary school *Yasukand* is noted. Despite the principal's sincere efforts to address this disparity, the local community seems not to embrace this laudable institution. Complicating matters further, the teacher is of Kurdish origin while the students mainly speak Turkish, which exacerbates the linguistic differences between them» (Sākma, 1307: 482-483, in Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2017:162).

In 1935, a government official sent to Saujblag Makri highlighted in a confidential message to the head of the Imperial Special Office both the political and geographical importance of the area. It was emphasized that measures were needed to generate a sense of unadulterated "Iranianness" among its inhabitants. This was envisioned as a safeguard against future political and economic threats to the nation. To this end, the Ministry of Education was requested to increase the number of primary schools, provided that all teachers were proficient in Persian (Sākma, 297/24468, in Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2015:87). In 1939, during the Ferdowsi Millennium Celebration, the Department of Education and Endowments of Kurdistan issued a statement. Drafted by Sanandaj's education representative, it called for unifying the language in Iran by eliminating regional dialects, including Kurdish, Lari, and Turkish (Sākma, 297/18753,

in Dehghani & Karimi & Rasouli 2015:87).

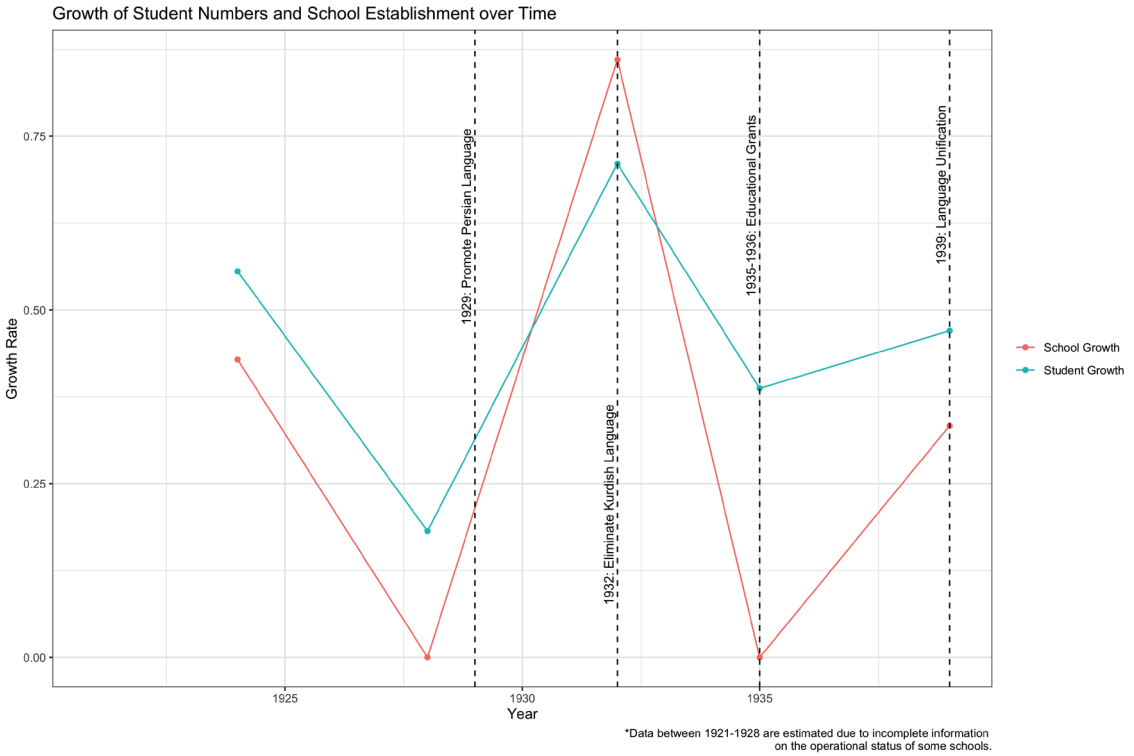

Figure 4 - Growth of Student Numbers and Schools Establishment over Time. Created by the author using data from primary sources detailed in the bibliography.

The line chart depicting the growth in school and student numbers from 1921 to 1939 shows significant variations in growth rates over time. These trends can be associated with certain policies and government directives during the Pahlavi era aimed at expanding education in Kurdistan. Regarding the growth in student numbers, the sharp rise of roughly 71% by 1932 might be explained by the governor of Kurdistan ensuring to the Ministry of Interior that basic education would eliminate familiarity with the Kurdish language (as shown in Table 1, appendix), pointing to efforts to centralize education. The continued growth in student numbers of 47% through 1939 could be linked to a communication from the Kurdistan Education Department, which emphasized the importance of language unification, indicating a drive towards promoting Persian language and culture in schools (as demonstrated in Table 2, appendix).

5 - Conclusion

This study has detailed how the Pahlavi regime's language and educational policies, as evidenced through key communications and initiatives, played a crucial role in the Persianization process and intersected with ethnic nationalism and the politics of belonging. Although the Pahlavi government attempted to reconstruct Iranian national

identity on a uniform cultural foundation, the actual policies often exacerbated ethnic disparities and promoted a monolingual ideology that marginalized non-Persian languages and cultures. The establishment of modern educational institutions, prioritizing Persian as the language of instruction, marked a significant shift in educational paradigms and became a fundamental element of state-led nation-building efforts.

These policies had profound impacts, extending beyond the classroom to shape societal dynamics and identity perceptions across Iran. The narrative of modernization endorsed by many intellectuals during the Pahlavi era posited that the adaptation of Western educational models was essential for overcoming the perceived backwardness associated with tribal and nomadic lifestyles. However, this perspective often neglected the rich cultural diversity within Iran, subsuming distinct ethnic identities under a singular notion of Iranianness, thus perpetuating ethnic inequalities.

One might ask whether the narrative of the nation and the construction of Iran must still be based on assumptions held by Iranian scholars at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite the multiethnic and religious nature of Iranian society, racial connotations persisted in nationalistic discourses, contributing to the Persianization process and resulting in ethnic inequalities. The Pahlavi-era policies, intertwined with linguistic marginalization, paralleled actions that should be reframed as genocide, ethnocide, and linguicide against ethnic minorities. The imposition of Persian as the official language of instruction reflected a broader trend of Iranian nationalism and the propagation of myths about the "pure Aryan race". While Reza Shah's efforts were touted as nation-building endeavors, they primarily focused on centralizing the state rather than genuinely modernizing it. Policies such as forced sedentarization of nomadic populations, Persianization of ethnic minorities, and brutal pacification of peripheries exemplified the adoption of dislocative nationalist ideas into official state practices (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016). As the following passage illustrates, since the birth of the Iranian national state, Persian hegemony has led to ethnic inequalities (Atabaki 2000).

> The diversity of pastoral nomads was reduced to the term *'ashayir* (nomadic tribes), eradicating its ethnic connotations. While their roles in defending Iran's borders and producing agricultural goods for the nation were emphasized, their tribal and sub-tribal identities were subsumed under a broader Iranian identity, diminishing specific national or cultural distinctions such as Baluch or Kurd. The *'ashayir* were depicted as one group among many forming the nation, reinforcing a homogenized national identity (Mirfakhraie 2008:17).

Moving forward, this research opens several avenues for further investigation. First, a closer analysis of the curriculum content during the Pahlavi era—particularly its emphasis on militarization, scouting, and physical education—could reveal how natio-

nalist ideologies were operationalized at the classroom level. Insights from archival materials such as yearbooks and state directives could be complemented by oral histories from students and teachers who experienced these policies firsthand.

Second, it is essential to draw parallels between historical and contemporary patterns of marginalization. Over the past four decades, Kurdish regions have remained among the most economically disadvantaged areas in Iran, with the lowest levels of per capita income, poverty rates, and life expectancy. At the same time, these regions have been heavily militarized, placed in a "state of exception" due to perceived separatist threats and their supposed roles as bases for foreign enemies. Parallels with other multiethnic societies, such as Turkey, could highlight the transnational relevance of these processes, bringing to light both similarities and differences. Like Iran, Turkey has used education as a tool to impose a homogeneous national identity, marginalizing ethnic minorities such as the Kurds within a framework of cultural assimilation. However, distinct historical, political, and social trajectories have shaped these processes differently, emphasizing the need for comparative studies to distinguish unique and shared elements.

Indeed, studies such as Marie Hoppe's *Subjektwerden unter Bedingungen von Outsiderness* (2023) provide an example of how interdisciplinary approaches incorporating subjectivation theory could offer a more nuanced understanding of how marginalized groups navigate and resist oppressive systems. This perspective offers valuable insights into the dual processes of subjugation and agency, revealing how individuals reinterpret and reclaim their identities within restrictive social and political frameworks.

Recent events, such as the national response to Jina "Mahsa" Amini's murder, highlight the ongoing relevance of this study. These events have highlighted the deep-seated ethnic and linguistic divisions within Iran, spotlighting the state's failure to harmonize its diverse ethnic compositions with the dominant Persian identity.[23] Such contemporary issues stress the critical need for revisiting and reevaluating the foundational policies of the Pahlavi era to better understand the roots of current societal fractures and the continued marginalization of non-Persian groups.

In conclusion, the politics of language and education in Pahlavi-era Iran provide significant perspectives into the complex interplay between state power, cultural identity, and educational reform. Interrogating the historical roots of linguistic marginalization is a necessary premise to build a more equitable and inclusive educational system that honors the diverse linguistic heritage of regions like Kurdistan and fosters a sense

23 The unprecedented display of the Iranian flag and expressions of national pride, primarily by Persian elites, across global cities from Tehran to Toronto and Los Angeles, often ignore or marginalize the experiences and identities of non-Persian groups such as Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis, who have faced decades of national, ethnoreligious, and linguistic oppression (Mohammadpour 2024).

of belonging for all its inhabitants. The process of racialization in representations of the ideal citizen, largely overlooked in discussions on Westernization, warrants scrutiny. Moving forward, a more layered understanding of Iran's historical narratives is crucial to fostering an inclusive educational environment and challenging persisting biases that shape the nation's identity.

The evolution of language policies in Iran, from explicit suppression to controlled tolerance, reflects the government's efforts to maintain Persian as the dominant language while permitting limited linguistic diversity. The impact of these policies remains a complex issue, underscoring the critical role of education in shaping language policies and their consequences. The complexity highlights the nuanced and often contradictory nature of national identity and linguistic policy in Iran, where gestures towards inclusivity can simultaneously mask deeper exclusions, thus perpetuating the longstanding divides in the very definition of the nation for non-Persians.

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APPENDICES

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Table 1

Date	Key communications and initiatives
1926	Allocation of funds in border territories
1929	Communication from the Ministry of Interior emphasizes the need to establish schools in Kurdistan (Hawraman nomadic area)
1929	Directive from the Head of the Education Department to promote the use of Persian language in schools
1932	Letter from the governor of Kurdistan to the Ministry of Interior, ensuring that basic education makes students completely unfamiliar with the Kurdish language
1935	Letter from Reza Shah's personal office to the Ministry of Education recommending the expansion of primary schools in both Khuzestan and Kurdistan

1935-1936	Allocation of additional grants for educational development and establishment of primary schools in the Khuzestan and Kurdistan regions
1939	Communication from the Education Department regarding the need in Kurdistan to unify the language and eliminate «sub-languages"

Table 2

Date	**Additional strategies and directives**
1st Pahl. Era	Creation of a limited number of secondary schools in Kurdistan, with greater emphasis on elementary schools. Free dissemination of Persian magazines and newspapers in *qarāṭkhāneh-hā* ("reading rooms")
1929	Education Department order to actively promote the use of the Persian language within schools
1934	Directive prohibiting the appointment of Kurdish educators and staff within educational institutions
1935	Confidential memo emphasizing the political and geographic importance of the Mahabad area and the need to generate a sense of «Iranian-ness» among its inhabitants, including increasing the number of elementary schools with teachers proficient in Persian
1939	Statement from the Kurdistan Education Department, coinciding with the 1939 Ferdowsi Millennium Celebration, emphasizing the imperative of unifying the language and eliminating «sub-languages» within Iran, including Kurdish, to preserve Iranian identity