

# DĀNESH

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The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
Department of International and Area Studies

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FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER  
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## **From the Faculty Advisors**

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This third volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As co-editors-in-chief, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi

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## **The Evolution of Gender Equality in Modern Iran**

Lindsey Eisenmann\*

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Earlier this fall in Iran, there was a bit of uproar as the Iranian football team faced Syria in Iran. While women were initially able to purchase tickets, they were barred from entering the game and left outside to watch as Syrian women were welcomed into the stadium.<sup>1</sup> This treatment was due to the ongoing law in Iran that does not allow women to be present at male sports games, an attempt to protect both women and Islamic law.<sup>2</sup> It is a law that is often used to criticize the apparent gender inequality in the Islamic Republic. However, shortly after the women were rejected from entering the stadium, many returned in order to protest and give a voice to themselves and the issues of gender segregation in Iran. There are various inequalities present in any government, but with some it may be more obvious, giving other nations a feeling of obligation to speak out about another government's shortcomings. However, it is essential to not focus only on the ways in which the Islamic Republic of Iran goes about suppressing women, as in doing so one would completely ignore all the ways in which women have fought over the decades to be heard, and it also overlooks the steps that the regime has taken for women in the recent years.

The Islamic Republic has retained its legitimacy by developing a give and take relationship with its citizens and loosening its grip on Iranians in certain areas in an attempt to maintain order. It has succeeded thus far in this attempt, as the regime has slowly given more freedoms to women and

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<sup>1</sup> Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iranian MPs speak out as women are barred from World Cup qualifier," *The Guardian*, September 6, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Golnaz Esfaniari, "Iranian Women Angered as Syrian Female Fans Allowed into Soccer Match," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 6, 2017.

occasionally turns a blind eye to what the regime deems to be unlawful acts. Despite the apparent gender inequalities and repression of women that developed as a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has given way to an era marked by the increasing education of women who are more present and active in the public realm. Women's increasing agency is slowly changing their lives and noteworthy actions taken by the regime are working toward more significant and lasting changes for women in the future.

### **Gender Roles in Iran**

Masoud Kazemzadeh claims that gender has never been more prominent of an issue than in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>3</sup> The strict female gender role, though not exclusive to Iran, has played into the discrimination and repression of women in Iranian society. After the 1979 revolution, when Iran was taken over by an Islamic regime, the image of and rules regarding women were drastically changed as the new government began defining gender roles in a way that aligns with institutionalized Islam. The government propagated the image of women as mothers and men as economic bread-winners in Iranian society, especially in the realm of education.<sup>4</sup> Women were given a very strict role in society, one that was both politically and socially enforced. Muslim women were portrayed only as “a mother and a housewife,” and that is the image that was most often depicted in mass media and schoolbooks.<sup>5</sup> Motherhood is a beautiful and significant part of womanhood, but it should neither be required nor seen as a woman's sole purpose. Placing this expectation on women not only keeps them from using their gifts and talents in society and the work force, but it also deems a whole portion of society who is incapable or unwilling to have children as worthless and without purpose. Iranian women have been given a set Islamic role that they are to play in society, and anything outside of that box is considered

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<sup>3</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism, Feminism, and Gender Inequality in Iran Under Khomeini* (University Press of America, 2002), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Goli M. Rezai-Rashti, “Exploring Women's Experience of Higher Education and the Changing Nature of Gender Relations in Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund (New York: Routledge, 2011), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Azadeh Kian, “Gendering Shi'ism in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 24.

undesirable and looked down upon. But this view has neither left women powerless nor has it made the regime unwilling to enact any change.

### **Veiling**

In the preamble of the constitution, the goal of the Islamic Republic is stated to be “the removal of women (from being objects) or (becoming a tool of labor) in the service of consumerism and exploitation and regaining the vital and honorable duty of motherhood in rearing religious children.”<sup>6</sup> The attempt to rid women of being seen solely as sex objects is a necessary step toward gender equality, but the way in which the regime initially enforced this step led to stronger gender divides and aided in the subjugation and oppression of women. Instead of enforcing restrictions on men that would keep them from treating women as objects, women became forced to hide behind the veil, and gender segregation became a part of public and everyday life. In post-revolutionary Iran, the government enforced veiling to protect women from sexual harassment. However, rather than attempting to curb sexism against women, it aimed at ridding women of their sexuality in order to protect men from female sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the implication of mandatory veiling was that society still saw women as a means for satisfying men’s sexual desires. But many women in Iran have been able to use this mandatory veiling as a way to assert themselves in the public sphere and express their individuality and creativity through it.

Popular media in the West often uses the veil to present Iranian women as passive victims of an oppressive regime, but it is clear that Iranian women are actively asserting themselves and enacting change. Despite the often negative view of mandatory veiling, the enforcement of the veil can be seen as a trigger for the growing presence of women in the public space. Imposing the hijab has actually allowed more women to participate publicly and freely because the public space became viewed as safe from male harassment and unwanted attention.<sup>8</sup> Many young women are even using more covering forms of veiling, such as the chador, not only as a way

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<sup>6</sup> Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, “Gender and Revolutionary Transformation: Iran 1979 and East Central Europe 1989, in *Gender & Society* 9, no. 3 (June 1995): 342.

<sup>8</sup> Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, 46.



to be present in public, but also to shield themselves from the male gaze.<sup>9</sup> But for less conservative women, veiling has become a way in which many young women are able to express their own autonomy and individuality. Some of these women do so by finding “subtler ways of getting around the dress code,” such as wearing the hijab looser, shorter, or adding color to their scarves and letting their hair peek out.<sup>10</sup> This is also an example of a way in which law enforcement has turned a blind eye to certain unlawful acts, as it is still not legal for women to show their hair, yet many young women are getting away with it more frequently now in Iran.

### **Rising Female Presence in the Public Sphere**

With a rising female presence in the public sphere, the 1979 revolution gave way to a growth in literacy rates and a greater presence of young women who challenge gender norms and assert themselves in public. As a result of the growing autonomy of women in public arenas, women are statistically receiving higher education levels and are more likely to end up in the workforce after schooling than they were under the monarchy prior to the revolution.<sup>11</sup> Iranian youth have become much of the driving force in this rise of education. The youth population in Iran has skyrocketed since the revolution, with “60 percent of Iran’s 80 million people under 30 years old.”<sup>12</sup> This means that the Iranian youth potentially have the strongest influence on society and hold the power to enact change in terms of issues such as gender equality. Not only is there a large presence of youth, but the literacy rates among the current youth population in Iran are up to 98 percent.<sup>13</sup> This has the potential to change the future of Iranian society, as both men and women will have the opportunity to use their education to impact Iran.

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<sup>9</sup> Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemah Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today,” in *Middle East Report* 241 (Winter 2006): 25.

<sup>10</sup> Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution*, (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Louise Halper, “Authority, Modernity, and Gender-Relevant Legislation in Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund (New York: Routledge, 2011), 11.

<sup>12</sup> “The Youth,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed February 22, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/youth>.

<sup>13</sup> “Iran: Education,” UNICEF, accessed February 22, <https://data.unicef.org/country/irn/#>.

Despite this rise in education rates, though, Iranian women still face many challenges both in the public and private sphere. Gender inequalities are still very prevalent in Iranian society, making it difficult for women to assert themselves in the work force and the political realm. However, the youth segment is highly literate and the admission of women into universities in Iran has risen to over 60 percent of total undergraduates with women present in a variety of fields, such as the sciences and medicine.<sup>14</sup> These facts give evidence to a change in how Iranians view designated gender roles, as it is clearly becoming more socially acceptable for women to take on a different role than only the role of a mother. Women also receive an education equal to their male counterparts and even work in arenas typically designated for men. This rise in education rates among women, despite the presence of explicit gender inequalities, begs the question of how this came to be. Since the revolution, the regime has attempted to make the ideal Islamic woman, a woman who not only fits the women-as-mothers gender role, but one who is also “socialized, politicized, and Islamized.”<sup>15</sup> This desire has led to a more accepting outlook on women receiving an education, and consequently an increase in the opportunities that are available for women to receive this education. As the government and society evolves in how they view the roles of women, the presence of women in all occupations will similarly expand as a result.

Despite this rise in education, women still face many challenges in making it in the workforce. Though the rates of women in the workforce have risen since the revolution, there is still a very low percentage of women in the private sector. The 2006 Iranian census revealed that women make up only 15 percent of those employed in the formal sector.<sup>16</sup> Although this does not give any indication to what percentage of women take part in informal work, it does suggest that despite a rise in education, women still face many difficulties in actually being hired in the formal sector. Similarly, in the United States the percentage of women in higher ranking offices are drastically lower than men, with women occupying less

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<sup>14</sup> Rezai-Rashti, “Exploring Women’s Experience,” 52.

<sup>15</sup> Golnar Mehran, “The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in *Comparative Education Review* 47, no. 3 (August 2003): 270.

<sup>16</sup> “Where Are Iran’s Working Women?,” Middle East Institute, January 29, 2009.

than 15 percent of executive offices.<sup>17</sup> This seems to be an almost universal bias, making it evident that this is an issue not exclusive to Iran. Consequently, it cannot be written off as an effect of Iran's revolutionary ideology. The overall treatment of women since the Revolution and their lower class status in society are surely factors in the making of hostile workplace environments.

In spite of the current low rates of women in the workforce, the rise in education for women has the potential to shape the future of women's political presence in Iran. With women attaining higher education levels and becoming more present in universities than men, they have the potential to work their way up in the job sphere. In the future, this could increase the possibility of women becoming a part of the decision-making process, which could in turn lead to the breakdown of other systematic gender inequalities.<sup>18</sup> Although the number is still low, women are also more present in the political realm now than ever before, which means in the future women could greatly shape governmental decisions and the overall experiences of women in Iranian society.<sup>19</sup> For example, the current Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, has taken measures to appoint more females into government offices. Iran has seen the appointment of the first Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, and the appointment of three female governors.<sup>20</sup> Steps are being taken not only by women in society, but also by the government in an effort to break down different barriers for women. As with many other nations, the Iranian government has a long way to go with gender equality. Importantly, though, they have not remained stagnant or refused to change their thoughts on the standing of women in Iran. The gender roles placed upon women have slowly developed from women's roles being designated to motherhood, to women being seen as an instrument to benefit society.<sup>21</sup>

## **Women and the Dating Culture**

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<sup>17</sup> Bryce Covert, "Women With the Same Qualifications as Men Get Passed Over for Promotion," *Think Progress* December 22, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition," 271.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Maysam Bizaer, "Iranian Labor Market on Path to Gender Transformation," August 22, 2017, <http://www.iran-bn.com/2017/08/22/iranian-labour-market-on-path-to-gender-transformation/3/>.

<sup>21</sup> Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition," 283.

As youth in Iran have been challenging gender roles and norms, there has also been a rise in youth dating culture, in spite of the gender segregation laws present in Iran. Iranian boys and girls are meeting not only in private parties and underground music concerts, but also in more open places such as parks, malls, and restaurants.<sup>22</sup> There is also a rise in public displays of affection, particularly among the youth, which older generations would have seen as abhorrent.<sup>23</sup> This dating culture is significant particularly for lower class women, as it creates possibilities for upwards social and economic mobility that were not previously available. Despite this small opportunity women have to move up the social ladder, the rise in sexual freedom among the youth has proven to be more beneficial for the males than for the females of Iran. There still remains a double standard which holds young women to higher standards than men when it comes to their sexuality. In Iranian culture, there is a constant double standard across all social lines in which a woman's virginity is held at a higher value than a man's.<sup>24</sup> This has led to many young women doing anything they can, even paying to repair their hymen if they can afford it, in an attempt to prove their virginity.<sup>25</sup> While promiscuity among men is often accepted or overlooked by their families, women face more scrutiny in regards to their sexual behavior.<sup>26</sup> Along with having more severe consequences for sexual behavior, women also suffer from the sexual harassment of men, as their increased presence in the public sphere often means having to deal with unsolicited sexual attention.<sup>27</sup> This sexual culture reveals that gender inequality is less a result of government action (although that does play into this issue) and more of a symptom of deep social inequalities. Again, though, this inequality is not exclusive to Iran. It plagues other societies as well, including American culture. Although there are no laws in the United States condemning female sexual activity outside of marriage, there is an overall culture of writing off male sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Asef Bayat, "Muslim Youth and the Claim to Youthfulness," in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>23</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan," 26.

<sup>24</sup> Zuzanna Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspiration and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 46, Issue 6 (2013), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan," 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

activity as normal while portraying women as sex objects, then shaming them when they are just as sexually active as men. This type of thinking has infiltrated all areas of American culture and, because of how ingrained it is, laws and government action cannot displace it. When it comes to Iran, it is easy to only place blame on Islam and the Iranian government, when much of the gender inequality runs much deeper than the government and has developed into a deeply ingrained bias.

With the development of a youth dating culture, the sexual culture in Iran is becoming more apparent. In an attempt to legitimize unlawful sexual encounters, President Rafsanjani in the 1990s publicly advocated “temporary marriages,” in which a man and a woman seeking sex could temporarily marry so that the act was not deemed unlawful.<sup>28</sup> These temporary marriages quickly proved to be more beneficial for men than women, as men would often use them to solicit prostitution.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, temporary marriages typically take advantage of women from lower socioeconomic classes. Women from the same class as the man would possibly be capable of demanding a higher price or a full marriage contract, whereas women from a lower class would have less power.<sup>30</sup> Some lower class women have used temporary marriages to wealthier men in an attempt to one day move up the social ladder, but this practice can quickly result in the sexual exploitation of the woman involved.<sup>31</sup> This attempt to enjoy casual sex while remaining Islamic is often seen as nothing more than “religiously sanctioned prostitution.”<sup>32</sup> Women are not on the benefitting end of this institution, and they leave lower class women vulnerable to lustful men taking advantage of them.

### **Steps Toward Equality for Women**

Regardless of their growing presence in the public sphere, women still suffer many work-based, sexual, and social inequalities. In order to provide more social freedoms for women and an escape from male harassment, the regime has developed ways in which they can give women some autonomy in the public sphere while still remaining in accordance with Islamic law. One of the more visible ways in which they have accomplished this is through the creation of women only parks. At the start of the Islamic

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<sup>28</sup> Bayat, “Muslim Youth,” 35.

<sup>29</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan,” 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Olszewska, “Classy Kids,” 13.

<sup>32</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan,” 25.

Republic, leisure sports were considered un-Islamic and, for women in particular, they were seen as immoral.<sup>33</sup> The government often prohibited women from leisure and physical exercise, as their main duty was to become good Muslim mothers, and it became particularly difficult for women to get officials to speak out on what was seen as such a taboo topic.<sup>34</sup> In the early 1990s, after an unsuccessful attempt to create the first women only park, parks throughout Tehran began providing spaces for women to take part in exercise classes.<sup>35</sup> However, it was not until 2004, after studies which revealed the poor health conditions among female youth in Tehran, that the idea of women only parks were once again placed under consideration.<sup>36</sup> The regime began creating new women only parks, which would allow women to remove their veils and dress however they wanted while enjoying the outdoors and partaking in outdoor activities alongside other women in their community.<sup>37</sup> Though the regime once viewed female exercise as a “western cultural invasion,” these female parks have been a huge success for the overall health of women.<sup>38</sup> As Shahrokni states, this creation of women only parks marks the start of the government making a switch from prohibitive to productive measures in its way of governing, particularly toward the female population in Iran.<sup>39</sup> Women are increasingly becoming seen as an integral part of society and, as a result, are gaining many freedoms and opportunities that were formerly unavailable. It would be easy to simply look at all the areas in which women are still suffering as a result of gender inequality in Iran, but systematic inequality is not something that is fixed overnight. Women in Iran over the decades have been fighting for their voices to be heard, and they have slowly enacted change as the regime has willingly taken various steps to improve the conditions of women.

Although these women only parks have provided an “Islamic” way for women to enjoy exercise and the outdoors, free from harassment and veiling, some women have seen these parks as an insult to Iranian women

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<sup>33</sup> Nazanin Shahrokni, “The Mothers Paradise: Women-Only Parks and the Dynamics of State Power in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

and believe they do more harm than good. A piece by *The Guardian* interviewed an Iranian women about these women only parks and raised the idea that women should not simply be given a reservation, and that this will damage men and women as they will never learn how to interact with each other in a healthy manner.<sup>40</sup> This is an important point, considering these women only parks are simply another means of gender segregation. It further enforces gender barriers in Iran: instead of making current parks more accessible to women, the government has simply found another way in which they can continue to segregate men and women. However, this argument overlooks the fact that significant change takes years of progress, and it neglects to acknowledge the change that has already occurred in the Islamic Republic. Focusing only on the negatives of this new addition would be to ignore how women have fought for their freedoms and succeeded in accomplishing their goal for these parks. These new women only parks can have a great effect on the overall health of women in Iran, and gives them a place to be freed of the veil and from male harassment. In terms of gender segregation, change must occur in order for youth to learn how to interact with the opposite sex in a healthy and appropriate manner, but these women only parks are a necessary step towards further change, and they are a success for women in terms of their health and enjoyment of outdoor activities.

### **Conclusion**

In examining apparent gender inequalities in a culture that is different from one's own, it is necessary to deconstruct both cultures and analyze how they reflect a bigger issue. It is easy to view the Islamic Republic's ideology as the driving force of this apparent gender inequality, but social factors play just as much, if not more, of a role in the perpetuation of any form of inequality. Removing the influence of the government, the social inequalities that women in Iran face are in some ways similar to those seen in the United States. Laws that segregate genders, and enforce restrictions directly on women, are a very tangible and more extreme representation of the challenges women in Iran face. But even in the presence of equal laws and "freedom" for women, an attitude of male superiority is still present and it has driven gender inequality for centuries in not just Iran, but societies all around the world, including Western societies. The equal gender laws present in the West have allowed them to shame Eastern

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<sup>40</sup> Renate van der Zee, "We hate the headscarf": can women find freedom in Tehran's female-only parks?," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2017.

societies without the same laws in place, furthering the divide between the East and the West and creating a false idea that the West is a place of freedom and equality for all. It is easy for the West, and more specifically the United States, to paint Iran as evil by blaming the Islamic Republic, but many of the social barriers women in Iran face are similar to experiences of women in the United States.

Gender in the Islamic Republic is a complex topic, and it is something that is continually changing. Although the West often views Iran and Islam as causing the oppression of women, this way of thinking assumes that the West has accomplished gender equality, which is not true. It also neglects to identify the ways the regime has influenced some of the successes of women in Iran. In order to maintain its legitimacy and remain an Islamic state, the Islamic Republic must consider its citizens' requests and assess how it can further evolve to meet the needs of the people, while still remaining Islamic and keeping its non-westernized image. Though there are still many measures that need to be taken to break down the patriarchal regime and encourage the inclusivity of all people, the Islamic Republic is not remaining stagnant and unwilling to change. The regime has been willing to analyze different laws, including the ones that deemed female exercise un-Islamic and unnecessary, in order to meet the needs of the people.



## Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

### More information

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### Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

### Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)  
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

### Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran  
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations  
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800  
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979  
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East  
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East  
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran  
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema  
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture