DĀNESH

Email: amarashi@ou.edu.
Weblink: https://commons.shareok.org/handle/11244.46/57

DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies
Volume 3 (2018)

From the Faculty Advisors

Since it's 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
Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History
Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

Manata Hashemi
Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

The Politics of Fashion in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Sydney Warrington*

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the world's only existing theocracy, the relationship between the state and society cannot exist mutually exclusive of one another, considering that the regime's legitimacy is contingent upon the religiosity of its citizens in order to maintain its national identity. Accordingly, defiance of Iran's conservative norms at the individual level is a threat to the state and must be systematically addressed in order to ensure stability; however, addressing issues of defiance in Iran is defined by a give and take relationship between the government and the people. This relationship manifests in all aspects of the Iranian experience and is most evident in the highly polarized discourse surrounding what constitutes Islamically appropriate dress for women. Upon the Islamic Revolution in 1979 under the supreme rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran implemented new legislation to make veiling mandatory in public for all women in Iran, legitimized by clerics' interpretations of Sharia Law, despite women's initial widespread protests against the hardline conservative rulings thrust upon them.[1] Due to the intrinsically linked nature of the Iranian state and its society, points of contention, such as that of the hijab and its relationship to religious authenticity, are exacerbated. Investigating the

---

*Author's Bio: Sydney Warrington will be graduating in May 2018 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Security Studies, with a minor in Middle Eastern Studies. She previously studied Arabic in Israel and is hoping to return to the Middle East after graduation to continue studying the language.

[1] Sharia Law is a legal system rooted in the interpretations of the Qur'an, hadith (accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's actions and sayings), and fatwas (the rulings of scholars).

evolution of women's fashion trends in relation to the political context is indicative of the convoluted connection between the two.

In the 21st Century, the Iranian women's fashion industry has an increasingly significant presence on the international stage. Its innovation challenged common Western perceptions of Iran's youth, which comprises roughly seventy percent of the country's eighty million people. These perceptions tend to homogenize this large demographic and consider the Iranian experience as one defined by restrictions and state-imposed piety.[2] The industry forces the observer to take a more nuanced look at traditional stereotypes surrounding the exoticised Iranian woman, typically painting a picture of an inferior, oppressed individual, denying her a sense of agency. On the contrary, the rise of a revolutionizing domestic fashion industry and women who are asserting their individuality in the form of vibrant personal fashion choices pushes the boundaries of the conservative laws in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This implicit opposition to the state greatly contributes to a shift in social norms among the perceivably secularizing, progressive youth that the government must seek to pacify in order to maintain legitimacy.[3] This claim will be substantiated by first investigating the evolution of the fashion industry in accordance with the political context in both historical and contemporary Iran. This is followed by an examination of the state's give and take strategy of managing the fashion industry's resistance. Finally, a conclusive analysis will be drawn by looking at how prominent women's fashion designers and fashion bloggers, often through the avenue of social media, are resisting state-imposed social constraints by way of non-political actions in Iran today. In conclusion, this paper will discuss the broader implications related to perceptions of modernity and how secular ideology and religious conservatism coexist in the Muslim world at large.

Correlation between Politics and Fashion

Instead of investigating the legal or the social features that constitute life as a young woman living in Iran in isolation, it is important to consider the correlative effect they have on one another. This tactic permits a holistic understanding of Iranian fashion from the micro-level, the everyday lives of Iranian citizens, as well as the macro-level, the political implications and the state's complex identity. The radical shifts in

---

[2] Maral Noori, "Youth in Iran Part 3: The Politics of Fashion," *The Iran Primer*, August 19, 2013, accessed October 3, 2017.
[3] Youth meaning below thirty years of age.

women's clothing over the course of the past half century are a visible implication of the broader struggle between the ideologies of hardline and reformist Islamists and the strong pro- and anti-Western sentiments. Understanding the historical context and its relationship to the progression of women's dress in Iran is crucial to examining the current and potential future impact of women's social freedoms as a result of their assertion of individuality through bold fashion statements.

The politicization of women's bodies dates back to before the revolution. A poignant illustration of this reality began in 1936 when Reza Shah Pahlavi outlawed the public donning of a hijab as part of a more comprehensive modernization program. This mandate stayed in effect until 1983 when Ayatollah Khomeini and the newly established Islamic Republic redacted this law, making appearance in public without a hijab a punishable offense, regardless of religious identification.[4] Reza Shah viewed Iran's resistance to westernization as a threat to his legitimacy, just as the newly established Islamic Republic viewed the persistence of secularism as a threat to its legitimacy. Both of these shifts in opinion and policy objectified the bodies of women, treating them as measures of religiosity or modernity, and subjugated women by expecting them to comply and shift their ideologies accordingly.

Reza Shah's forced "unveiling" sparked a radical response from clerics who deemed the hijab crucial to the moral legitimacy of the individual; consequently, the legislation was renounced following his resignation in 1941. Although it was no longer compulsory, veiling was socially constructed as an anti-modern, ultra-orthodox practice, which established prejudices against the hijab. These prejudices were institutionalized, often preventing women (and men with wives that continued wearing the hijab) from advancing socially and in the workplace. The education system explicitly opposed the chador,[5] and even higher-end hotels and restaurants would refuse service if the customer was wearing one.[6] The fashion industry in Iran was booming at the time of the Shah's reign and was representative of the various, wide-ranging levels of ideologies among the culture. Secular urban women often wore clothes that emulated Western

---

[4] Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire," *Middle East Report* (Winter 2006), doi:10.9783/9780812200430.191.

[5] A chador is a large, enveloping piece of cloth that leaves only the face visible.

[6] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics of Hijab in Iran: From Confinement to Choice," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2007), doi:10.2202/1554-4419.1114.

fashion trends that were plastered throughout Iranian media as part of the modernization project, and rural or more traditional women fashioned themselves more conservatively in printed veils.[7]

At the start of the Revolution in 1979, many educated, middle-class women began wearing their hijab as part of a political movement against the Shah's regime to reclaim their religious identity; this was largely in response to Western cultural invasion, which they feared was on the verge of eradicating Iran's societal morality.[8] However, most had no intention of making mandatory veiling a characteristic of the new state. Directly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that women in government positions were prohibited to appear in public without a hijab, and women protested fervently until the government repressed them.[9]

Upon the implementation of the Islamic Penal Code in 1982, veiling was legally required by all women, punishable by up to seventy-four lashes. The regime justified this ruling by claiming that the hijab was an avenue for women's empowerment by sheltering them from the gaze of inherently sinful men in the public sphere. As a result, women had greater access to higher education and a more significant presence in the workforce.[10] The Penal Code states that women must wear a "proper hijab," but there is no consensus among Islamic scholars as to what exactly appropriate Islamic dress constitutes, which has led to vast inconsistency in implementation, subjecting women to punishment for things as wide-ranging as using makeup to wearing too short of a manteau.[11]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and specifically during Rafsanjani's presidency from 1989-1997, women began pushing the boundaries of the state-imposed hijab, and the chador became a less common clothing choice as it was increasingly considered a fundamentalist practice among

---

[7] Elspeth Reeve, "The Fascinating Fashion Evolution of Iran's State-Imposed Modesty Garments," *The Atlantic*, July 9, 2013, accessed December 7, 2017.

[8] Manata Hashemi, "Youth Culture in Iran" (lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, 2017).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics."

[11] "Iran: The Enforcement of Dress Codes," Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (Ottawa, 2011), https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/11/07/IRN103920.E.pdf.

society.[12] As the generation after the revolution, called "the sons and daughters of Khomeini," came of age in the 1990s, clothing trends among young women began to shift away from adhering to a loosely fitting, black hijab and began to challenge restrictions in various ways.[13] The regime responded by amending the law regarding dress code violations, altering the punishment from lashes to imprisonment from anywhere between ten days to two months or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred thousand rials.[14]

Growing frustrations over such government restrictions on social freedoms perpetuated increasing support for the liberal, reformist political ideology, which promotes democracy, greater social freedoms, and improved relations with the West. This increased support resulted in the election of a liberal college professor, Mohammad Khatami, in 1997. The new reformist government fueled a "silent resistance," or the act of implicitly opposing the government by not cooperating rather than using explicit tactics, such as protests or violence. Among Iranian youth, passive resistance manifested in women's innovative clothing--bright colors, exposed hair, more form-fitting manteaus. Khatami and his administration advocated for the moral prestige of the hijab, but argued in favor of the right of the individual to choose how to wear the hijab, as opposed to forcing repressive legislation. Asymmetrical power dynamics between the religious leaders and elected officials, however, largely hindered Khatami and his allies from implementing their reformist initiatives and thwarted opposition to conservatism. For example, Khatami's first Interior Minister, Abdollah Nuri, was tried and imprisoned for five years for his overt criticism of the restrictive policies of the state, specifically regarding mandatory veiling.[15]

Despite President Khatami's campaign promises for change and the domination of Reformists in the Parliamentary elections of 2000, they were unsuccessful in accomplishing any legitimate expansion of social liberties via the state apparatus. This is attributable to their inferior political agency in comparison to the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and the ruling body of clerics who were able to successfully undermine any attempt by the elected officials to implement domestic or foreign policy reform. The Reformists' failure to follow through on their promises caused many supporters to

---

[12] Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics."
[13] Hashemi, "Youth Culture in Iran."
[14] Ibid.
[15] Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics."

perceive their ineffectiveness as betrayal by selling out to Khamenei and the hardliners, inciting mass-public frustration with the administration. As a result, a conservative presidential candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, won the election by a small margin in 2005. While leniency on enforcing the Penal Code's restrictions on social freedoms throughout the Reformists' rule fostered and increased levels of defiance amongst the youth, Ahmadinejad aggressively cracked down. He allotted a significant amount of power to and expanded the mandate of the "Morality Police" for the purpose of regulating every aspect of Iranian social life. This institution is responsible for administering warnings and "moral guidance" to regulate women's behavior in the public sphere, subsequently leading to the arrests of hundreds of women for clothing deemed too provocative.[16]

Upon the elections of 2009, in which Ahmadinejad sought a second term, the majority of the youth turned to his moderate opponent, Mir-Hussein Mousavi. Despite youth opposition, the incumbent president and the hardliners reclaimed power. Speculation that the election was fraudulent sparked a monumental movement termed the "Green Wave" Campaign, which was largely composed of women seeking political and social liberties. As protesters took to the streets in response to the election outcomes and Ahmadinejad's strict, state-imposed morality initiatives, the government was forced to either respond with brute force or make concessions to appease the population. It attempted to repress the campaign's proponents by way of arrests and fines, which only further perpetuated the Green Movement's support, requiring the state to reconsider their methodology and act strategically in order to avoid inciting more defiance. The regime publicly declared the movement as radical, anti-Iranian, and anti-Islamic and claimed that no compromises would be made on its behalf. However, officials were left with no other choice but to turn a blind eye to less significant issues regarding social practices that challenged the state (e.g. the secularization of women's fashion) in order to focus their efforts on combating deliberate political activism in opposition to the state. This, in turn, provided a window of opportunity for women emboldened by the Green Movement to continue pushing the dress code boundaries, sparking contemporary Iran's modern "fashion revolution."[17]

---

[16] Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics."

[17] Hooman Majd, "Think Again: Iran's Green Movement," Foreign Policy, January 6, 2010, foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/06/think-again-irans-green-movement/.

Current Political Economy and the Fashion Industry

When the incumbent president, Hassan Rouhani, took office in 2013, sanctions by Western governments in response to Iran's nuclear weapons program were crippling the economy. Despite the country's massive oil revenues, the inflation rate was upwards of thirty percent, and the GDP was declining at an estimated 6.8% per annum. [18] Under immense pressure to follow through on his campaign promise to improve the economy, Rouhani was forced to work with the P5+1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany) to negotiate sanction relief in exchange for a reduction in their nuclear weapons program.[19] Iran's reintegration into the global economy took effect in January 2016 following the lifting of sanctions, which greatly enhanced women's ability to purchase Western clothing and export their own designs.[20]

In an attempt to diversify the economy, Rouhani sought to fuel the emerging fashion industry while simultaneously containing it to avoid any national security problems. As a result, previously underground fashion shows became legally permissible but, like all other public events, required gender segregation. In addition, the government allowed fashion designers and bloggers to use social media for a creative outlet and a form of advertising. However, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, composed primarily of government officials and a few representatives of the fashion industry, is responsible for monitoring illicit behavior regarding clothing. This imbues them with the ability to deem certain actions in violation of Islamic values and administer corresponding punishments, such as shutting down social media accounts or entire companies. For example, in June 2014 a well-known design institute in Tehran by the name of "Khaneh Mode," or Mode House, faced extreme scrutiny for allowing men to attend a fashion show that they were hosting in which one of the models wore a piece of clothing resembling the Iranian flag but without the religious symbols. When photos from the show began permeating the Internet, backlash from Conservatives was severe and

---

[18] Mohammad Mostafavi-Dehzooei, "Iran's economy under Rouhani: achievements and obstacles | Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs," *Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, May 17, 2017, accessed December 6, 2017.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Shima Houshyar and Behzad Sarmadi, "A Fashionable Revolution: Veiling, Morality, and Consumer Culture in Iran," Ajam Media Collective, January 15, 2017, accessed October 4, 2017.

eventually led authorities to shut down the institute upon the premise that their actions were both anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic.[21] Its director, Javid Shirazi, in response, said the following:

Since last year [2013] there's been a transformation in the framework of the permits we can get and what we can do. With the great potential this country has and the great desire young Iranians have, there is a bright future for the fashion industry in Iran, and the shutting down of Khaneh Mode is just necessary experience we need to gain to go ahead.[22]

This statement illustrates the motivation behind individuals in the fashion industry to risk their business endeavors by defying the norm. Shirazi's position, and that of the institute, are not inherently political. Their actions are done with the intent of creative liberty rather than overt political change, and they recognize that this must eventually lead to legislative reform for the sake of the future of Iran's fashion industry. Through the implementation of these "non-movements," Iranians are able to passively oppose the state, thus circumventing more explicit displays of protest and violence.

Implicit Activism Through Personal Style

The Islamic Republic of Iran's inauspicious socioeconomic conditions throughout most of the 2000s greatly affected consumer demand. Government restrictions and the lack of economic opportunity reduced the amount of monetary capital necessary to stimulate the growth of industries in the private sector, but the state's attempt to forcefully isolate Iranians from Western culture also fueled discontentment. This had the adverse result of enhancing secular youths' desire for reintegration into the global economy and cooperation with the West, which manifested in women's progressive fashion.

Interestingly, it appears that isolation from trade relations with Western countries incentivized innovation in the fashion industry domestically, resulting in a vibrant textile industry in which fashion designers are entirely self-sufficient in their ability to sew their own designs. Therefore, sanctions encouraged women to pursue their business endeavors if they wanted new, "modern" items on the market instead of simply emulating Western styles by purchasing their goods. As influential fashion designers

---

[21] Kay Armin Serjoie, "Iranian Fashion Pushes Boundaries in the Face of Crackdowns," *Time*, July 26, 2017, accessed February 26, 2018, http://time.com/3012471/iran-fashion-official-crackdown/.
[22] Ibid.

began revolutionizing the industry in tandem with Reformists' expansion of political influence, secular women in particular began finding empowerment in self-expression through the styles, colors, and patterns of their clothing, which spread like a wave across Iranian society. This new wave of inventive personal style is not purely an adoption of Western fashion trends, but rather the creation of an entirely new market for fashion-forward, Muslim women.[23] This is evident in the presence of female Iranian entrepreneurs in the field of fashion design, primarily concentrated in Tehran.

One example is Farnaz Abdoli, who launched her groundbreaking women's clothing company, Poosh (Persian for cloth), in 2012. On Poosh's extremely popular Facebook page, with roughly eighty-five thousand likes, the "About" page reads as follows:

> Fashion is a statement, not a style. Fashion does not have to be worn casually, nor outside the runway. Fashion is fit for all sizes for all people of all ages. Fashion is an art of personal self-expression, not an excuse to be pretty, popular and charis.[24]

Poosh maintains a heavy emphasis on self-expression, offering pieces within every collection that accommodate the identities of women across the ideological board, from conservative to highly secular. Abdoli recognizes the multifaceted nature of the Iranian woman's identity and encourages women in Iran to be bold with their fashion choices by trying new prints, cuts, or colors that are still in line with "Islamically appropriate" dress. The company is unique in the sense that it is clothing designed by an Iranian woman for Iranian women. The designer has a university degree and was fully capable of pursuing a less restricted career abroad, but instead she decided to stay and pursue her mission of empowering women to embrace their individuality.

The company uses Facebook as its main source of advertising as the government prohibits public advertisements from representing women's bodies; however, social media has provided a loophole for Iranian fashion designers to advertise their designs, and for individuals to showcase their

---

[23] Alice Curci, "An Iranian fashion revolution?" *Your Middle East*, July 19, 2013, accessed October 3, 2017.

[24] "About: Poosh," Facebook, accessed February 28, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/pg/POOSHdesign/about/?ref=page_internal.

personal style, through fashion blogging and social media apps such as Instagram.[25]

A study done in 2015 examining social media trends in Tehran found that three of the top trending search words, primarily via Instagram, were "fashion," "design," and "style," and it discovered that women's clothing companies and fashion bloggers had some of the most significant web traffic. This popularity has greatly contributed to the increasingly significant presence of Iran's fashion industry on the international stage.[26] Iran's many fashion icons, all of which are upper or middle class, set a standard of appearance toward which young women strive. Instagram bloggers such as @fashionsandwichbybahar, who is a fashion, beauty, and lifestyle blogger with a following of one hundred fifty-three thousand, can have real cultural influence.[27] She endorses high-end makeup products and brand-name labels, encouraging young women in Iran to attain her expensive style, even if it requires living beyond their financial means. Since the concept of dignity is central to the Iranian experience, and appearance is crucial to maintaining it, women are given the responsibility of lofty stylistic goals.[28] Opportunities to engender a more complex social understanding such as those stated above allows an increased potential for social mobility, through "marrying up" and generating a new self-representation.

Lower class Iranians are frustrated with their economic constraints, which prevent them from living lifestyles comparable to the hyper-wealthy elites that often flaunt their wealth via social media and have significantly more freedom of expression as a result of their class and connections. Another popular Iranian Instagram account that exemplifies this phenomenon and demonstrates the desires of many wealthy secularists is "the Rich Kids of Tehran." With one hundred twenty-two thousand followers, the bio of the account reads "Stuff They Don't Want To See

---

[25] Curci, "An Iranian fashion revolution?."

[26] Julie Tomlin, "Social media gives women a voice in Iran," *The Guardian*, September 22, 2011, accessed October 4, 2017.

[27] "fashionsandwichbybahar," Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/fashionsandwichbybahar/.

[28] Manata Hashemi, "Waithood and Face: Morality and Mobility Among Lower-Class Youth in Iran." *Qualitative Sociology* 38, no. 3 (July 12, 2015): 261-83. doi:10.1007/s11133-015-9306-3.

About Iran."[29] Assuming "they" is referring to both the conservatives in Iran as well as Western perceptions of what life in Iran looks like, the account intends to combat these narratives by representing the diverse realities experienced by upper-class Iranian youth in Tehran. The account's posts highlight the youths' convoluted, layered identity due to the state's attempts to promote piety and enforce their perceptions of morality by showing the lavish lifestyle of the ultra-rich, including photos of women in bikinis and fashion forward women in loosely hanging hijabs.[30]

Broader Implications

Using the body as an indicator of all individuals' experiences within the given country's civil society can be problematic. For example, in the case of young Iranian women, it is ultimately up to the observer to decide whether resistance to ultra-conservative attire simply represents a change in social norms as individuals seek to express their creativity and individuality, or if their actions are methodical and indicate a shift in political ideology away from religious fundamentalism and toward Western ideas of modernity with the intention of inciting policy reform. The answer is rarely as simple as it might seem. It is necessary to exercise caution when analyzing fashion in Iran in particular, in order to avoid objectifying women's bodies by using their clothing and their self-representation via social media as a method of measuring modernity, gauging adherence to religious ideology, or speculating political intent, which is a common tendency when investigating Muslim women at large.

The discourse surrounding women's dress in the Islamic Republic of Iran contributes to broader discussions regarding the relationship between secular and conservative ideology, contemporary feminism, and perceptions of modernity in Iran as well as in the Muslim world as a whole. The progression of women's fashion throughout Iran's history not only serves as a visual representation of the evolution of a complicated political context, but also speaks volumes to the ability of these women to adapt and continue to be agents of change and not simply subjects at the will of authorities in an often repressive state. Looking to the future of Iran, the government will continue to adapt along with its people, using a populist approach to appease them while simultaneously restricting social liberties

---

[29] "therichkidsoftehran," Instagram,
https://www.instagram.com/therichkidsoftehran/.
[30] Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

in order to protect the religious integrity of the state as they have historically. However, unlike the past, young Iranian women who are empowered by their education, their renewed entrepreneurship opportunities, and their presence in the public sphere will continue to reject the norms formed by their parents' generation and tirelessly seek new avenues by which they can challenge the notion that the parameters of the female body are to be set by the state rather than by the individual.[31]

---

[31] Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan."