

## INTRODUCTION

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The past two decades have produced an abundance of writing on societal change in Iranian culture. These studies usually emerge under the banner of social sciences, with some claiming to be in-depth ethnographies. They are the result of surveys, questionnaires, or interviews with a limited number of respondents, or they come in the form of focus groups, alongside some fieldwork. Most of this scholarship asserts that trends in socio-economic development, modernization, and globalization have served to transform the country's fundamental cultural institutions and core values. This volume aims to take a more comprehensive approach by asserting, through the lens of reproduction, how Iranian cultural norms and practices have prevailed, in essence if not in form, despite these global and local shifts. It maintains that many of these studies are missing the larger picture; they lack comprehensive and longitudinal perspective. For example, research that explores changes in marriage patterns in Iran often neglects to examine the institution of marriage itself and further fails to situate marriage in its broader cultural Iranian context. One such study interprets marriage arrangements between couples who met on the internet in Iran as an example of modernity undermining tradition. However, this study overlooks the full trajectory of these relationships, which often disintegrate during ensuing traditional marriage contract negotiations. According to most of these studies, societal change implicitly serves to disrupt or erode cultural norms and values. While these works have merit, they tend to miss the more nuanced, longer-term, and profound dynamics involved in interactions between modernity and tradition. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2010) in *Small Places, Large Issues* argues, "'modernity' and 'tradition' are not mutually exclusive and can exist side by side" (274), and "although there are bound to be tensions and contradictions within complex societies

... it is the resilience of cultures that ensures their perpetuation and/or their revival rather than any coercion, whether political or religious, imposed by any outside factors" (321). My own findings, spanning more than three decades of research, concur with this view and confirm that the essence of cultural norms and practices in Iran endures, despite changes in form. As history has shown time and again, cultures do not disintegrate under pressures of modernity, war, revolution, authoritarianism, or any other form of aggression and coercion. Rather, outside threats often serve to reinforce local traditions; many anthropological studies show that when cultures are exposed to outside innovations, they select and mold them to suit their needs. As Maya Unnithan-Kumar (2010: 163) explains regarding the infiltration of global technologies into traditional societies, "technologies in themselves do not bring about social transformation but it is in how they are made socially meaningful that their power lies."

Focusing the lens of this approach on Iran, the chapters in this volume were selected based on their shared theme of reproduction. Revealing the complex dynamics of encounters between modernity and tradition, they illustrate how no single factor, be it development, modernity, globalization, conservatism, or state policy, determines or shapes established cultural institutions. Rather, it is the versatile and multifaceted ways in which people respond to—and engage with—innovations that determine the extent to which change can penetrate and alter a culture.

## **Why Reproduction?**

The selection of reproduction as the common theme in this collection stems from several factors. First, since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, reproduction has been the state's primary target of reform. The authorities consider reproductive values and practices to have been destabilized by modernity and seek a return to what they see as their traditional roots. As a result, the norms and practices that surround reproduction have been subject to more upheaval than any other institution in society and have remained the most contentious item on the agendas of the theocratic state and its opponents at both ideological and generational levels. The state's prioritization of reproduction over all other institutions is understandable, since it is reproduction, as the embodiment of family, kinship, marriage, and fertility, that underpins society and ensures

its stability. Second, despite the state's extensive efforts to return and confine reproductive practices to their traditional forms, these practices seem to have undergone more drastic changes than any other institution in society. Research on the nature and extent of these changes in reproductive practices sheds light on the nature and extent of social and cultural change in the country in general. Third, a more in-depth analysis of shifts in the structure of kinship and family, which today seems to be disintegrating at an alarming rate in Iranian society—consider, for example, the country's high divorce rate (“Marriage Threefold of Divorce” 2020)—leads to a better understanding of the dynamics of the interaction between modernity and tradition. Fourth, although Iran is not a monolithic culture and is home to considerable cultural diversity, Iranians share strong and deep-rooted values on issues of reproduction, family, and kinship—values that seem to apply to all layers of society, from rich to poor and from rural to urban. Likewise, against the sizeable number of successive younger generations deviating from parental authority and traditional norms, there exists an equal number who remain compliant. Often, when faced with conflicting values and aspirations, both generations try to compromise on a *modus vivendi* to maintain the harmony of the community. For example, more and more girls from conservative families are losing their virginity before marriage. This act of transgression provokes violent reactions, even murder, as depicted in Chapters 1 and 3 in this volume.<sup>1</sup> However, many of these young girls are saved by being able to resort to hymenoplasty—in some cases more than once—to remain “acceptable” future wives.<sup>2</sup> The paramount importance of virginity and its persistence is also clearly illustrated in recent research among Iranians in the diaspora (Zavieh 2017). The compromises made to protect these girls also range from their mothers helping them seek hymenoplasty, to some highly religious female doctors, whom I have met during my research, who were prepared to compromise their own religious beliefs and perform hymenoplasty on unmarried girls. The rate of hymenoplasty had increased so much by 2006 that one of the leading sources of emulation, Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeg Rouhani,<sup>3</sup> in answering the question of whether hymenoplasty was allowed, promptly issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) allowing it. Finally, reproduction, as the nucleus of my own longitudinal research, has provided me with abundant data to counter the claims of those studies that conclude that Iranian culture has radically changed.

## Background

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 served as a critical juncture for seemingly profound change in Iran. The past four decades have witnessed a complicated relationship between the theocratic state and its ideological opponents, particularly among the younger generations, who are the main agents of change. The state remains consistent in its resolve to save the country from the invasion of “corrupt Western cultural imports” and to return it to its “traditional” roots. In the process, it has repeatedly employed coercive and brutal measures to enforce its ideology, built on its interpretation of Islamic law. Over the past forty years, Iranians have experienced the emergence of conservative, pragmatic, reformist, and moderate presidents, and, most recently in 2021, of an ultra-conservative cleric. Any efforts by the two reformist and moderate presidents to bring about meaningful change were thwarted by the current political structure of the Guardianship of the Jurisprudence. However, Iranian society, especially the generations born after the revolution, has not remained passive in the face of these fluctuations. Rather, these young people, a considerable number from among the conservative groups themselves, have gradually moved away from their parents’ ideological and/or political stances and are striving to create their own vision of an ideal society. While opponents to the regime from all political, social, and educational backgrounds remain vocal and active even at the cost of their own lives, another equally if not more effective weapon of resistance lies in the responses of ordinary people who manage to go about their everyday lives, either ignoring or finding ways to bypass the dictates of the authorities. In his seminal book *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Asef Bayat (2009, 2013) explains how this type of resistance can erode the effectiveness of the state’s politics.

Moreover, while the Iranian state has the power to control political opponents by brutal means, its grip is loosening on the younger generation, which is increasingly defying the rules of behavior, morality, ethics, gender relations, and sexuality, imposed by the Guardians of the Revolution. The authorities, in their search to keep pace with these changes and regain control, are anxious to adjust their strategies to “guide” the young in the “right” direction. In her insightful book *Iran Re-Framed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, Narges Bajoghli (2019), through her decade-long research among the “media producers” of the state, describes in meticulous

detail the new strategies adopted by the authorities “to court Iranian youth.”

As explained in Chapters 4 and 8, the social and economic policies implemented by the state in the first two decades after the revolution, which included a massive and successful educational program and policies aimed to slow population growth in the 1980s, further deepened the rift between the two camps. In the process, the dynamics of the relationship between the state and its challengers shifted, and it is now often the educated and socially and politically aware youth who, through their provocative and defiant acts, take the lead and spur the state into action. By the beginning of the millennium, twenty years after the revolution, the introduction and nearly immediate ubiquity of internet technologies gave most of the younger generation easy and unfettered access to the outside world. Today, apolitical youth want to enjoy simple daily freedoms: to have fun, to mix with the opposite sex, and to live a life in public free of government surveillance, harassment, and oppression.

There is little doubt that Iranian society has undergone major change over the past few decades, despite the dictatorial policies of the authorities. However, the ethnographic research in this volume explores the extent to which these social changes have altered the core cultural values that are the building blocks of Iranian society. These chapters question whether social change is identical to cultural transformation. As Furlong and Cartmel (2007) in *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives* also show, the assumption that social change equals cultural transformation is not unique to conservative societies but applies also to developed and pluralistic communities. In a discussion of the changes brought about by modernity in the context of capitalism, social class, and gender, they write, “We accept that experiences of young people have changed quite radically over the last three decades, yet suggest that in the age of ‘high modernity’ life chances and processes of social production remain highly structured” (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 3). Moreover, they assert, “While structures appear to have fragmented, changed their form and become increasingly obscure, we suggest that life chances and experiences can still largely be predicted using knowledge of individuals’ locations within social structures: despite arguments to the contrary” (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 2).

## The Book

The chapters in this book are a selection of essays that have been published in different academic volumes and journals over the past fifteen years, between 2006 and 2021. Reflecting more than three decades of research on reproduction in Iran, these chapters explore the dynamics of the institutions that serve as the social expression of reproduction, including family, marriage, kinship, patriarchy, fertility, and the relationship between the state and the nation. They are presented in an order that aims to explore the impact of change over time on the values of reproduction in Iran.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which approaches a different aspect of the topic of reproduction in Iran. The chapters are closely interconnected, and there is an inevitable amount of repetition of topics between them, especially on infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). However, in dealing with the same themes, each chapter offers a fresh view on the topic.

Part I of this volume focuses on the meaning of modernity and its impact on three of the foundational constituents of Iranian culture, namely “face” (*aberu*), early marriage, and patriarchy. Chapter 1 analyzes the role “face” plays in individuals’ interactions with the outside world, which culminate in one maintaining, gaining, or losing face and on which one’s reputation and position in the public sphere depend. Deeper among the factors affecting face also lie the notions of honor and shame and their inextricable links with the public position of a person and his/her wider network of kin. While the research for Chapter 1 was gathered in 2004, Iranian attitudes toward face remain unchanged. As current reports show, face continues to form an important part of a family’s and individual’s public persona. The examples of face put forth in this volume represent a widespread phenomenon. As the findings of one study show, “Iran already had high levels of violence against women, with reported 8,000 so-called honor killings between 2010 and 2014” and that “about 20 percent of all murders and 50 percent of family murders in East Azerbaijan Province are related to sexual and honor issues” (Pirnia, Pirnia, and Pirnia 2020). According to recent reports, sixty women fell victim to honor killings in the southern province of Khuzestan in the past two years.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, honor killings are not carried out exclusively in cases of women bringing shame upon their families but can also apply to men deviating from what is considered the social and sexual norm, including cases of male homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> For example, in May 2021,

a well-known Iranian filmmaker was murdered by his parents, allegedly for remaining unmarried at the age of forty-seven (“Iranian Film Director Murdered by Family” 2021). Although human rights activists condemn these acts of violence and conservative authorities often express support for sentencing the perpetrators, these cases are rarely pursued seriously (Fassihi 2020). Most authorities come from conservative backgrounds; they tacitly endorse this behavior, believing that it is for the family alone to address. While overstepping cultural and sexual norms continues to provoke violent responses among conservative families, the occurrence of such violent reactions is less common among secular and less conservative groups in society, who tend to adopt more subtle strategies to bury the shame of family “transgression.” Other chapters in the book provide examples of face playing a decisive role, such as in cases of runaway children or infertility and its persisting stigma.

Chapter 2 addresses the phenomenon of early or child marriage in Iran and examines the assumptions of policymakers who believed that educating women would empower them and cause them to delay marriage, thus solving the problem of child marriages.<sup>6</sup> The initial research for this chapter was carried out in 2004 in Yazd, based on its ranking as the most conservative town in the country due to its low rate of divorce. On returning to the same city four years later, a new set of statistics was released, ranking it as having the fourth highest rate of divorce in the country. I asked the director of the newly opened State Welfare Organization Center, which offers counseling to vulnerable men and women, what brought about such a drastic change. He explained that the Center was receiving 30,000 telephone calls per month, mainly from women, most of whom were desperate to initiate divorce but were afraid of their fathers and brothers who threatened to kill them if they did so. Obviously, these women hoped that the Center would release them from the “prison” of marriage. Recent studies carried out in 2020 in Yazd confirm that the main causes of divorce remain violence against women, the interference of family members into the newly married couples’ relationships, and infertility (predominantly in cases of female infertility), which drives men to seek other wives (Bidaki et al. 2020). Likewise, the ten-year-old girls I knew in 2004 have since attended universities and are economically independent; they are now supposedly “empowered” and therefore no longer forced to marry early. Now in their late twenties, many of these young women remain unmarried and are still living with their parents. Although such a delay in the age of

marriage is partly by choice, the prospects of finding a marriage partner are also more limited due to a variety of reasons, which are further discussed in Chapters 2, 6, and 8. As leading an independent life away from the family remains out of the question for young unmarried women, predominantly those living in small towns, remaining unmarried means that these young women's lifestyles have not kept pace with the socio-economic changes over the past two decades. Interestingly, back in 2004, numbers of consanguineous marriages were decreasing, and marriages with outsiders had become more frequent. Two decades later, with the divorce rates soaring, many families blame this instability on the decrease in consanguineous marriage, which had traditionally strengthened relationships within the kin group through the bond of mutual duty and obligation. However, as various studies show, despite this decrease, the practice of consanguineous marriage remains prevalent. For example, one survey carried out in 2017 reports that, of the 1,535 couples interviewed in both urban and rural areas, 74.3 percent had consanguineous relationships and 62.3 percent were between first cousins (Nouri et al. 2017).

While social trends point to an increase in the number of young women in Iran who choose to delay marriage or remain single, most eventually marry and form families. The endurance of traditional reproductive practices is not unique to Iran. For example, on the topic of delayed marriage, Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy J. Smith-Hefner (2021: 394) conclude that "in the majority of cultural contexts . . . (a) marriage is still a given, (b) childbearing is still expected within the bounds of marriage, and (c) both are closely linked to the achievements of social adulthood." This is also confirmed by longitudinal studies of women cohabiting with their partners, a practice referred to as "white marriage." Discussions in Chapter 5 of this volume show how, in the long term, marriage is the only realistic option for most of these women. Alternative prospects remain bleak if the cohabitation comes to an end, as many do. However, men in this form of "marriage" are not doomed in the same way as women are if the relationship ends.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime, recent reports on early marriage show that not only does the practice continue, but it may even be on the rise:

According to figures from the Iran Statistics Center, in the three-month period from March 20, 2020, more than 7,000 girls aged ten to fourteen years were married, with one girl aged less than ten also registered as married. The same body found that the mothers of 346



children born in that period were not yet fifteen years old, with mothers aged fifteen to nineteen giving birth to some 16,000 babies. Additionally, it counted 131 divorces involving a wife aged less than fourteen years, and 2,650 divorcées aged fifteen to nineteen years.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 3 is a study of the impact of globalization on fatherhood in Iran. It examines the role of fatherhood in a predominantly patrilineal and patriarchal society among men caught at the crossroads of modernity and the preservation of their identities and privileges. While the findings confirm the persistence of patriarchal practices in one form or another, they also show how traditions are exploiting modernity in creative ways. Among more liberal, secular, and educated fathers, control ranges from showing affection to family members and ensuring that the family remains financially and otherwise dependent on them, to trying to gain full knowledge of the behavior of family members, through the help of surveillance technologies that allow them to spy on their wives' and children's online activities. At the same time, among a large section of conservative groups in society, whether educated or otherwise, control is often exercised more forcefully and even violently.

While some scholars point to weakening patriarchal values and decreasing gender inequalities, discussed in Chapter 2, the case studies in this chapter confirm that, for men, fatherhood remains the culmination of their personhood and identity, from manhood to masculinity and sexuality. Regardless of diminishing patriarchal values and powers, to date, a considerably large number of families remain dependent on fathers or their close male relatives for support. Such dependence not only stems from the persisting cultural perceptions of the role and place of women in society, but is perpetuated by the country's legal system, which denies women equal access to resources, financially and legally, reducing any power they might have over their families. For example, the number of female heads of household, which has risen sharply in Iran, has in no way given women the power to control their families. These women face challenges that men in their positions do not; among these are farmers who are routinely denied ownership of land that had belonged to their husbands, and access to key amenities, such as loans or machinery. The assumption by some scholars that these women are now in control of their families is contradicted by reports from various official sources indicating that such a change is "a shift from a relatively normal special trend into a social problem" (Statistical Research and Training Center 2014). Finally, Chapter 3

discusses how patriarchal practices, often involving violence, are not only controlled and carried out by men, but incorporate the full endorsement and cooperation of women, too. This more holistic look at gender relations remains under-researched by students of Iranian culture.

The chapters in Part II explore the various population policies of different Iranian states through a historical lens, showing their frequent policy reversals concerning the nation's reproductive life. These chapters examine Iran's population policies under two monarchies and under the current Islamic Republic. Chapter 4, first published in 2004, analyzes Iran's highly successful anti-natalist policies of the late 1980s. It argues that these anti-natalist programs were successful for two reasons: first, the program was well-coordinated; second, it was mindful of the fact that asking families to have fewer children ran counter to the cultural and religious imperatives of reproduction, and thus it adopted convincing strategies that remained harmonious with these practices. Chapter 5 explores the outcomes of these anti-natalist policies two decades later, when the 2011 census showed that population growth had fallen to below replacement level. This study examines the state's reversal from its previous policies to its subsequent pronatalist ones, as the state aims to increase its population from around 84 million to 150 million by 2050. To encourage growth, policies initially offered several incentives and disincentives, which failed to gain the cooperation of the generation of reproductive age; despite these efforts, the population continued to decline. While this chapter analyzes the factors responsible for the state's failure to encourage larger families, it also shows through case studies that, regardless of the resistance of young couples to respond to the state's plea for more children, most end up having at least one child, not to satisfy the state, but under persistent pressure from their kin group and society in general. Chapter 6 is a study of the state's most recent pronatalist policies, introduced as a result of the failures of the previous ones. The latest policies, which were legalized in November 2021, soon after the election of an ultra-conservative president in August 2021, are extremely coercive if not draconian. The new measures ban all forms of contraception in the hope of forcing married couples to reproduce. The state has gone so far as to sanction the use of a dating app called Hamdam (meaning "companion") to find potential matches for its users (Teh 2021). This chapter also examines the process by which the treatment of infertility, which had been ignored by previous state policies, has been incorporated into

the current population policies, as part of the state's body politic. These findings also counter the state's simplistic claim that socio-economic factors are to blame for the population decline. It asserts that resistance to having more children stems from a multitude of factors, which are also discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 8.<sup>9</sup> These factors include the younger generation's resentment for being treated as reproductive pawns and for being expected to reverse their reproductive values and practices, which reflect those the state itself had instilled two decades earlier.

The chapters in Part III discuss the high prevalence of infertility in Iran and the persistence of the stigma of barrenness, both of which explain the country's enthusiastic reception of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The studies in this section examine the effect of ARTs on family and kinship and their impact on the extent to which the values and practices attached to reproduction have been altered in the process. Chapter 7 demonstrates the successful, but unhappy, outcome of resorting to ARTs in cases whereby modernity meets with tradition; it cites, for example, cases of infertile men who received sperm from third-party donors and subsequently subjected their wives to years of violence. A number of issues arise from the case studies in this chapter, which highlight: the persistence of gender inequality; the tenacity of values among men on manhood and masculinity; the persistence of women forced to bear the brunt of infertility; and the dilemma of maintaining "purity" of "lineage" that arises when an infertile couple is faced with resorting to a stranger's gametes or remaining childless. Chapter 8 addresses the relationship between religion and gender in Islam and explores the impact of the Islamic Republic's policies on education and the legitimization of ARTs on women. Women find themselves in a Catch-22: while education and the ability to make reproductive choices seem to have liberated and empowered women in many respects, cultural barriers act as obstacles, and women are often brought to a halt by a wall of cultural norms and values with limited room to maneuver. Interestingly, this chapter also shows that, although women have not remained passive in the face of cultural, legal, and political restrictions and have surmounted many of these obstructions, ultimately they too, when faced with these decisions, seek refuge in marriage and family as a strategy to protect some of their hard-won freedoms. Chapter 9, through the study of infertility treatment clinics, shows the persistence of two of the most basic aspects of reproduction, namely the major stigma attached to the inability to reproduce and the paramount importance of continuity of lineage

through biological relatedness. The study of infertile couples illustrates how core values surrounding reproduction and kinship persist in essence despite changes in form. In seeking fertility treatment and considering their options, infertile couples, who need gamete donation, invariably choose their blood relatives as donors to ensure the continuity of their blood line and the perpetuation of the traditional forms of family and kinship. Ironically, as this study reveals, such practices result in the emergence of new forms of kinship and relatedness, which contradict the strict Islamic instructions regarding the prohibition of social and sexual interaction between close blood relatives (*mahramiat*). Conceiving with gametes from blood relatives also has implications for the structure of the traditional family.

The chapters in Part IV discuss the introduction of ARTs to Iran and the role played by Shia Islamic jurists in legitimizing their use for infertility treatment. The studies provide insights into the way these technologies have been interpreted, endorsed by religious leaders, and used by their recipients to perpetuate their cultural values attached to reproduction. Chapter 10 examines the introduction of reproductive technologies to Iran and their legitimization by Shia Islamic jurists. It analyzes the process by which Islamic jurists interpret the significance of reproduction in Islam and thus issue a wide—often contradictory—array of *fatwas*, which shaped the practice of ARTs for all parties involved. Unlike the Sunni leadership, which has banned all third-party gamete donation for infertility treatment, Iran's Shia jurists have found solutions within Islamic texts to legitimize all forms of ARTs (Inhorn and Tremayne 2012). This chapter further points to the flexibility created by contradictory verdicts, as well as the ensuing uncertainty and confusion that leave these practices in a state of flux. Chapter 11 explains the history of the introduction of IVF technology to Iran and elaborates on the process by which some Shia jurists found ways to permit third-party gamete donation. One solution involves re-casting the definition of lineage from biological relatedness to an agreement between the gamete donor and recipient whereby the donor forgoes his right to ownership of the child, a condition that had been the original premise in legitimizing third-party donation. While this redefinition seems to suit and satisfy all parties by appearing to uphold the imperative of the purity of lineage without breaching any religious or cultural taboos, in reality it deviates sharply from this imperative. Finally, Chapter 12 discusses how the preferences of third-party gamete recipients have shifted over time, from relying on blood relatives to actively and secretly seeking anonymous

third-party donors, in order to claim their own ability to conceive and thus appear to abide by the imperatives of protecting their blood lines. This chapter further examines the inherent conundrum of third-party donation in general and anonymous donation in particular for the politico-religious authorities. On one hand, the drive for population growth means that infertility treatment is high on the state's agenda and that resorting to donors will help increase the number of children born using ARTs. On the other hand, this practice conflicts with every existing Islamic rule, even those that define the parameters of third-party donation.

Taken together, these chapters indicate that modernity and globalization have not succeeded in upending Iran's fundamental institutions. Instead, the incorporation of innovations into the country's social fabric has only revealed the consistency of these core reproductive values. Through the lens of reproduction, this volume explores the interplay between these innovations and the fundamental institutions surrounding reproduction, such as marriage, lineage, patriarchy, and "face" in Iranian culture. As these ethnographic essays show, in embracing new technologies with open arms, Iranians remain guided by their core cultural values and accommodate or even manipulate those aspects of modernity that best fit into their own molds.

## Notes

1. See also Afary (2009).
2. In Iran, a woman who has never been married or, by definition, who has never engaged in sexual intercourse, is referred to as a "girl." Moreover, some of these women are in fact girls as young as fourteen years old.
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad\\_Sadeq\\_Rouhani](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Sadeq_Rouhani)
4. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/honor-murder-khuzestan-iran-statistics/31636333.html>
5. For example, see Yurcaba (2021).
6. For more information on recent studies on child marriage in Iran, see Montazeri et al. (2016).
7. For more on the practice of white marriage in Iran, see Vatandoust and Sheipari (2020).
8. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/gender-discrimination-in-iran-girls-textbooks/31635422.html>; see also "Child Marriage in Iran" (2021) and "Sharp Increase in Child Marriages" (2021).
9. See also "Iran's Demographic Crisis" (2020).

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