

## Nurturing Intellectuals in the Islamic Republic. The National Elites Foundation

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In the past decades, constant brain drain has become a serious challenge for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the beginning of the 1990s, awareness of the problem and hence measures to counter this trend have increased. After some efforts to attract Iranian expatriates' interest in investment in—or even remigration to—Iran, in 2005 the *National Elites Foundation* was established. The foundation focuses on identification of highly gifted individuals, and support and preservation of the domestic elites to which they belong. Both material and non-material support are granted to select groups of beneficiaries, thus reflecting the Islamic Republic's attempts to support and care for its citizens' public and private lives.<sup>1</sup>

Iran is currently the country experiencing the largest loss of human resources in Asia: at the end of the 1990s, economists estimated Iranian brain drain to be at fifteen percent (Carrington and Detragiache 48). This emigration of highly skilled professionals and academics has become a vitally important issue for the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Over the past several years, active efforts have been made to deal with this challenge, which greatly affects the Iranian economy, as well as the country's scientific and technological role in the region. One of the measures implemented is the establishment of the National Elites Foundation (*Bonyad-e Melli-ye Nokhbegan*, hereafter referred to as NEF) in 2005. Since most research on Iranian brain drain is based on data acquired from outside of the country, existing research must be considered incomplete and reflective of a highly external view on the subject. Due to this deficit, the present study aims to make a contribution through examining and evaluating for the first time the statutes, documents, and reports of the NEF, and the country's efforts to stop or even reverse further migration of elites from Iran. The main question raised in this article is: What is the Iranian government's perception of elite, and how is this definition influenced by brain drain? Furthermore, this article seeks to introduce

the goals and aims of the NEF, along with its characteristics and its beneficiaries, addressing the question of whether the Islamic republic successfully nurtures its own intellectuals.

### Defining Elite

Modern elites can be divided in functional sector elites and partial elites. Following Gächter (7-8), one can also distinguish between different categories of elites, such as birth elites, value elites, functional elites, power elites, position elites, political elites, and counter-elites. In most classical cases, different forms are combined in a system, i.e. birth and power elites accompany a monarchy, power and position elites go with a totalitarian regime, while functional elites may also demonstrate characteristics of performance elites. The constitution of and affiliation between elites in a particular socio-political system is related to historical and social change (Gächter 8).

Adapting and modifying Perthes' model on changing elites in the Middle East ("Einleitung" 18) and Buchta's model of Iranian informal power structures (9), Reissner puts Iranian elites in three concentric circles: (1) an inner-circle elite, which consists of high-ranking clerics and religious laymen, with the latter having entered this circle only since the election of President Ahmadinejad. The inner-circle

elite determines the course of the Islamic republic—but contrary to during the first ten years after the revolution, no longer dominates discourse, rather only reacts to it. (2) Members of the administrative elite who participate and advise in the political decision-making process. They are predominantly state employees who largely work in secular professions, and the group has greatly increased since the revolution. (3) An outer circle consisting of the discourse elite is the most heterogeneous group: its members participate in discourse on political, economic, and socio-cultural issues. Along with journalists, academics, and writers, members of this circle may come from the previous two circles, and it could be considered an intellectual elite (191-99). In addition, Raket—based on Perthes—argues that the politically relevant elite not only distinguishes itself through positions in state institutions, decision-making on domestic and foreign policy, or active involvement in policy formulation—but also through its participation in defining norms and values. From this perspective, the definition of elite is hence much wider, including politicians of the opposition, journalists, high bureaucrats, leading economists, members of the security agencies, intellectuals, etc. Therefore, the politically relevant elite in Iran is not made up exclusively

of “decision-makers,” but rather incorporates “opinion-makers” as well (Raket 16; Perthes, *Arab Elites* 5).

The Iranian government and respectively the NEF defines elite in its *Statute of Recruitment and Preservation of Elites* (“Ā’in-nameh-ye jazb va negahdari-ye niru-ye ensani-ye nokhbeh”) as a group of persons intelligent, capable, creative, and endowed with a brilliant mind. They are said to contribute to the acceleration of the country’s growth and development with their intellectual activities and creations (*Ā’in-nameh-ye jazb va negahdari*), while having a noticeable influence on the output and spread of science, art, technology, culture, and administration of the country (*Āshnayi ba zavabet* 12). Referring to the categorization presented by Gächter (8), these state-defined elites can be classified as “performance elites” who are distinguished by above-average achievements in their respective professional fields. In the current power system of the Islamic Republic, according to the models offered by Perthes and Reissner, such elites are part of the third and outermost circle. They therefore belong to the intellectual-discourse elite as “opinion-makers” in the Iranian socio-political field of discourse.

### Iranian Brain Drain

What factors and conditions have influenced this definition of elite? The Islamic Revolution of 1979 represented a major turning point. Starting in the 1950s, Iran’s prospering economy, increasing oil revenues, and a change in Iranian society from traditionalism to modernism led an increasing number of upper- and middle-class families to send their children to schools and universities abroad, mainly in the US, Great Britain, West Germany, France, Austria, and Italy. With the Islamic Revolution, and closure of Iranian Universities in 1980 that was to last for three years, a mass emigration of Iranian professionals began. The new government considered Western-educated professors and scholars *gharbzadeh*, which can be translated as “indoctrinated by the West” or “westoxicated,” and did not mind them leaving. This attitude towards the emigrated elites remained predominant until the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the start of a new agenda of economic policies under President Rafsanjani in 1989. In order to rebuild the war-torn country and its economy, the government called for Iranian specialists and professionals to return home to Iran. However, until 1993, only 2,600 highly skilled professionals and scientists answered this call. In light of an estimated diaspora of one to four million people of Iranian origin

worldwide, including relatively high educational qualifications among this group, the efforts of the Iranian government until then must be seen as highly unsuccessful (Torbat 276, 280; Hakimzadeh).

The term brain drain (*farar-e maghz-ha*) did not emerge in the official rhetoric of the Islamic Republic of Iran until the late 1990s. Awareness of not only a lack, but even a constant loss of know-how in the country emerged only during this decade. One of its consequences was the demand for more academic freedom in 1997 by Mostafa Mo'in, then-President Khatami's education minister. President Khatami's visit to the United States in 2000, during which he attended the UN Millennium Summit and expressed his concern over Iranian brain drain, along with an interest in attracting wealthy Iranians to invest in their home country, can be considered another landmark. Two years before, while addressing an Iranian audience in New York, he promoted financial engagement in Iran (Torbat 293-94). Considering the limited response and the small numbers of expatriates returning to Iran, scholars tend to declare this attempt a failure (Torbat 295; Hakimzadeh)—or at least, as not successful enough to have had an effect on the increasing brain drain.

In present-day Iran, an economic crisis and subsequent high unemployment rates,

social insecurity, limited freedom of the press, and living conditions in a political and social system saturated by religious-moralistic rules set the stage for a further outflow of know-how. The Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology assessed the financial loss caused by brain drain at about 38 billion US dollars each year. In past years, four out of five Iranian winners of international science Olympiads have chosen to leave the country for better opportunities abroad (Hakimzadeh).<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, the Iranian government initiated a new approach to safeguard the country's human resources: the focus shifted from recruitment of highly qualified specialists abroad, to the identification and support of professionals and experts already in the country. In September 2004, the council of ministers (*hey'at-e vaziran*) passed the Statute of Recruitment and Preservation of Elites (*Ā'in-nameh-ye jazb va negahdari-ye niru-ye ensani-ye nokhbeh*), and on 31 May 2005, the NEF was founded by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (*Shura-ye 'Ali-ye Enqelab-e Farhangi*). With the establishment of the NEF, a foundation for the support of more than 9,500 intellectually gifted individuals by 2011 was laid (Bonyad-e melli-ye nokhbegan, *Gozarash-e barnameh-ha* 33).

### Purpose and Practices of the Foundation

The foundation regards its own task as the identification, guidance, and financial and spiritual support of elites with the purpose of accelerating scientific and technological productivity and the country's development. With the foundation, an advanced scientific, technological, and economic position in the Middle East is to be attained. These defined goals lie within the framework of a perspective paper issued by the Expediency Discernment Council (*Majma'-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*), which came into effect in 2005. The paper outlines a distinct development of the country in the fields of economy, science, politics, culture, and society in four five-year plans until 2025, and shows that the Iranian government is well aware of the significance of highly qualified professionals in worldwide competition for new technologies and development. In fact, the NEF in its 2011 annual report expressly declared the migration of elites to be one of the fundamental challenges of the country (*Gozarash-e barnameh-ha* 27).

The NEF has released and published more than 30 documents to date, including guidelines on the identification of elites at universities and research centers, financial support for academic travel and research trips, establishment of science competi-

tions, and procedural instructions for the assessment of international science contests.

The foundation's structure consists of the office of the president, a board of directors (*hey'at-e omana*) that is in charge of the budget and accounting and includes the president of the Islamic Republic as one of its members, and the elites' council, which is responsible for interpretation of the foundation's statutes and principles. The position of the president of the NEF is currently occupied by Nasrin Soltankhah. As president of the foundation, she becomes titular vice of the country. Soltankhah has worked as a presidential advisor on scientific and technical affairs since 2005, and also acts as president of the Center for Women's and Family Affairs (*Markaz-e Omur-e Zanan va Khanevadeh*). To ensure coverage for the whole country, the foundation is not only located in the capital, but also maintains offices in two-thirds of the country's provinces, with several offices still in the planning stages. They serve as the outposts of the central office in Tehran, covering educational and research institutions in the respective provinces.

Upon examination of the structure of the foundation, the close interaction and integration of the institution's committees with the presidential office is particularly striking. The foundation's president is always

a vice president of Iran. The head of state himself, currently Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, both presides over the foundation commission and is a member of the Supreme Court of the Cultural Revolution, which approves modifications of the foundation's constitution. Such changes are in turn suggested by the board of directors, while the foundation president presents them to the Supreme Court of the Cultural Revolution. That the president wields considerable influence in supporting elites and allowing them to apply their skills could be considered an accurate estimation. The fact that the foundation was established during the presidency of former President Khatami raises the question of the previous president's involvement in the development and implementation of the NEF.

### Types of Beneficiaries and Selection

#### Criteria

Among the beneficiaries of the foundation's privileges and grants are students, undergraduates, graduate students, and doctoral candidates; along with lecturers, inventors, research scientists, junior researchers, winners of Quran competitions, and artists.

Support starts from elementary school, where talented students are assisted and backed in the "responsibility of performing their task in the construction and rise of the

country" (*Bonyad-e melli-ye nokhbegan, Āshnayi ba zavabet* 16). Beneficiaries at the university level qualify through university entrance exams (*konkur*), national and international science olympiads, inventions, creative and artistic activities, and top performance in their respective disciplines. The assistance includes financial aid and travel allowances. Inventors represent another important group of beneficiaries. An essential condition of admission is the marketability and practicability of their projects and inventions. The promotion of junior researchers and research assistants working in scientific centers and universities is linked to how innovative their research field is, and their former beneficiary status (i.e. as undergraduates or graduate students). Lecturers and researchers connected to scientific centers and universities can profit from different types of assistance. They qualify by measurement of their academic achievements and publications against the criteria of national and international scientific centers. Accordingly, grants consist of bestowing an academic chair, financial support for the acquisition of research equipment, travel allowances for domestic research trips and research-related journeys abroad, funding of a research assistant, and introduction to a number of ministries and committees. To facilitate beneficiaries' access to interna-

tional research and new technologies, the foundation furthermore seeks to establish a network of scientists on a national and international level. Another group of beneficiaries are artists: Every year eight individuals who stand out due to their innovative, creative work and their contribution to the development of Iranian-Islamic society are chosen. The benefits they receive include reduced or eased military service (applying only to male beneficiaries) and allowances for the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca (also granted to other groups, see below). Winners of national and international Quran recitation competitions represent a further group among the foundation's beneficiaries. So long as they are enrolled at a university or theological seminary, they may receive undergraduate and graduate study or doctoral grants. Researchers in the field of theology have the possibility to obtain fellowships, innovation credits, and funding for Quran research, along with establishment of Quran classes (Bonyad-e melli-ye nokhbegan, *Āshnayi ba zavabet; Āshnayi ba ā'in-nameh-ha; Gozaresh-e barnameh-ha*).

With this category of beneficiaries, the character of the foundation as an institution embedded in a political system that regards religion as a self-evident part of its members' lives becomes clear. Another element of this are cash donations given

to newlywed couples who have received grant benefits, accompanied by attendance of the foundation's president at the ceremony. Apart from financial support, the foundation has also set up programs for the moral, spiritual, and religious encouragement and edification of the beneficiaries, so they would "always feel in the service of the nation, the holy order of the Islamic Republic and its noble goals; not to remain in expectations but learn to pay their tax of knowledge and giftedness, and put it in the service of Islam and the Islamic nation" (Bonyad-e melli-ye nokhbegan, *Gozaresh-e barnameh-ha* 98). The stated aim of the NEF is to nurture a performance elite that is in the service of the Islamic republic and acts as one of its supporting pillars. Although the NEF's elites would be located only in the outermost circle in the above-discussed elite model, the Islamic republic's leaders are well aware of the elites' future influence as part of the country's discourse elite. One of the measures to ensure a proper attitude of these elites toward the Iranian-Islamic state is interweaving the country's national interests with religious state ideology through its diverse programs. Other non-material benefits include special privileges regarding military service and a onetime allowance for the *hajj*. The former is offered to all beneficiaries holding university student or

a doctoral candidate status, as well as to inventors, artists, and winners of Quran competitions. In practice, university students are exempted from military service for the duration of their studies; a large part of their military service can be replaced by research relevant to the armed forces (Bonyad-e melli-ye nokhbegan, *Āshnayi ba zavabet* 45-6).

Beside these efforts for the identification and development of domestic elites, the Iranian government continues to devote attention to Iranian expatriate elites. A statute passed in 2009 expressly addresses expatriates by granting financial support for the acquisition of real estate and construction of buildings in Iran. Conditions include, of course, a return to Iran and taking up employment at a national science or research center (Bonyad-e melli-ye nokhbegan, *Gozaresh-e barnameh-ha* 38).

### Conclusion

The Islamic Republic's official perception of elite demonstrates a strong focus on a scientific target group. This group, which can be referred to as a performance elite, belongs to the Iranian discourse elite, with its members acting as "opinion-makers" in Iranian socio-political discourse. Examining how the elites issue has developed over the past decades, a definitional focus becomes comprehensible. After a revolu-

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tion and almost a decade of war, the Iranian leadership and the country's economy have experienced the consequences of the emigration of predominantly highly educated and professionalized Iranians. Since the tendency of emigration from Iran has not stopped or reversed since then, the government continues to struggle against ongoing brain drain, which currently represents the largest loss of human resources in the region. Confronted with challenging global competition, especially in the field of technology, the Iranian government thus hopes to catch up in the international struggle for highly qualified specialists. The long-range objective is acquisition of an advanced scientific, technological, and economic position in the Middle East. One of the measures taken in this respect was the establishment of the NEF in 2005. Its programs aim at the recruitment and preservation of highly qualified professionals in order to accelerate the scientific, artistic, technological, and cultural growth and development of the country. The target group includes scientists, students, inventors, artists and winners of Quran competitions, to whom the foundation grants financial and material support. Beside material allowances, the foundation provides non-material benefits, which stand in contrast to material inducements and benefits by demonstrat-

ing that those in charge of the NEF are not only interested in nurturing a technically and scientifically highly professionalized elite, but also the beneficiaries' religious and moral education. This stems not only from Islamic holistic anthropology, which includes care and responsibility for the mental well-being of the members of Islamic society, but also from a calculated aim to mold the Islamic Republic's future cadres and elites.

A dominantly technical understanding of intellectual elites disregards the influence of opinion-making intellectuals and might turn out to be one of the major handicaps of such an approach. Regardless, the Iranian government is well aware of the elites' influence as part of the country's discourse elite. The foundation's inclusion of religious-ideological allowances likely reflects this. To what extent the efforts of the NEF will pay off remains to be seen. Since all programs and privileges provided by the foundation focus on pull factors and almost completely neglect the social and political dimensions of the problem, whether this will ease the situation and forward the country's struggle against brain drain remains questionable.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on research conducted in the course of the author's bachelor thesis: Leube, Julie S.: "Migration und Braindrain im Iran." BA thesis. Philipps-Universität Marburg, 2011. Print.

<sup>2</sup> A positive aspect of brain drain and migration that has long been neglected is the backflow of migrants' resources, namely of knowhow and remittances to the home countries (Gibson and McKenzie 16). Given the lack of information and research on this issue with respect to the Iranian case, one can only speculate. Furthermore, the country's isolated political and economic situation makes Iran a special case deserving of further investigation.

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