

Educating Sectarianism: Saudi and Iranian Classrooms in the Iran-Iraq War

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ABSTRACT

During the Iran-Iraq War, Saudi Arabia and Iran turned classrooms into instruments of sectarian mobilization. Saudi Arabia never formally entered the war, yet the Saudi state treated Khomeini's revolution as a direct challenge to both Wahhabi religious authority and monarchical legitimacy. In response, Saudi educational materials intensified the language of *tawhīd*, casting Shia practices such as shrine visitation, mourning rituals, and *tawassul* as *bid'a*, *shirk*, and evidence of Iranian subversion. Iran's postrevolutionary curriculum developed an opposing narrative, presenting Wahhabism and the Saudi monarchy as imperialist distortions of Islam aligned with the United States and Iraq. This paper traces how both states used textbooks, religious instruction, and wartime memory to teach children that the conflict was a sacred struggle over the future of Islam. The 1987 Mecca incident became a central example of this process: Saudi materials framed it as Iranian desecration of the holy sites, while Iranian schools remembered it as martyrdom under Wahhabi oppression. By examining these competing educational narratives, this paper shows how the Iran-Iraq War helped harden sectarian identity at the level of childhood formation. The war's legacy survived because it was built into the stories children learned about religion, nationhood, and the enemy. Rather than treating education as the sole cause of later conflict, this paper argues that schools institutionalized and amplified antagonisms produced by both sectarian ideology and geopolitical competition.

The evidence used here is representative of official state priorities rather than every classroom experience. It draws on selected textbooks, ministry directives, educational programs, and later scholarly reviews. Because Iranian curricular materials are more accessible than Saudi wartime classroom records, the archive is uneven. These sources can show what each government sought to teach, but not that every teacher followed the curriculum identically or that every student absorbed it as intended.

INTRODUCTION

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the ideological conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran extended far beyond the battlefield. Although Saudi Arabia did not fight directly, it played a crucial role in supporting Iraq, both financially and ideologically, in an effort to contain the spread of Iran's

revolutionary Shia theocracy.¹ For the Saudi monarchy, Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power in 1979 posed a direct threat: not only did his doctrine of *velāyat-e faqīh*² challenge traditional Sunni understandings of Islamic governance, but his calls to overthrow "un-Islamic" regimes championed revolution within Shia communities across the Gulf, including within Saudi Arabia itself.³ In response, Saudi Arabia treated the Iran-Iraq War as a religious and political crisis, mobilizing educational institutions to delegitimize the Iranian regime and reinforce Wahhabi doctrine.⁴ In Saudi classrooms, textbooks emphasizing particular readings of *tawhīd*⁵ portrayed Shia devotional practice, such as shrine visitation and mourning rituals, as *bid'a*⁶ and *shirk*⁷, reinforcing the Wahhabi claim that Shia Islam was a deviation from the "true" faith.⁸ Iranian educational reforms under Khomeini mirrored this effect in reverse: for instance, fifth-grade religion readers warned students that Western powers and their "agents in Arabia" were conspiring to destroy the Islamic Revolution.⁹ Wahhabism was depicted not as a legitimate Islamic school of thought but as a reactionary ideology created by colonial powers and now wielded by the United States and the Saudi monarchy.¹⁰ Both states framed the war not simply as a geopolitical conflict but as a battle over the trajectory of Islamic regional and global practice. Loyalty to one's sect became a sacred duty, and education was repurposed to shape a generation of youth into ideological soldiers.¹¹ Saudi Arabia's curriculum ultimately warned of the revolutionary ambitions and heretical nature of Khomeinism, while Iran's textbooks condemned Wahhabism as the religious arm of imperialism.¹² These dueling narratives fostered a sense of existential struggle, encouraging children to view the opposing sect not merely as a political adversary but as a spiritual enemy. This polarization helped deepen the Sunni-Shia divide during the war and laid a foundation for the sectarian hostilities that continue to destabilize the region today.

¹ F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45–87.

² *Velāyat-e faqīh* ("guardianship of the jurist") is Ayatollah Khomeini's theory that a senior Shia cleric must wield supreme political authority until the Hidden Imam's return. Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 146.

³ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴ Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁵ *Tawhīd* (lit. "making one") is the Wahhabi term for uncompromising divine monotheism, the doctrinal core of Saudi Islam that rejects any practice suggesting intermediaries between God and believers.

⁶ *Bid'a* ("religious innovation") denotes post-Prophetic rituals deemed illegitimate; Wahhabi jurists class Shia mourning rites or the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid*) as *bid'a* to delegitimize them.

⁷ *Shirk* ("associating partners [with God]") is the gravest sin in Islamic theology; Wahhabi texts label shrine-veneration and saintly intercession as *shirk* to brand such acts quasi-idolatrous.

⁸ Prokop, Michaela. "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁹ Shorish, M. Mobin. "The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran," *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

¹⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Velāyat-e Faqih)*, trans. Hamid Algar (Tehran: Alhoda, 2002).

¹¹ Freedom House, "Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran's Textbooks," 27 March 2008, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2008/discrimination-and-intolerance-irans-textbooks>

¹² Prokop, Michaela. "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

Shorish, M. Mobin. "The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran." *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

WAHHABISM AND SAUDI ARABIA

In the decades leading up to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Saudi Arabia and Iran developed sharply contrasting state ideologies — Wahhabism and Khomeinism — that would come to define their regional rivalry, especially in the realm of education. In Saudi Arabia, the roots of Wahhabism trace back to the 1740s when the Najdi cleric Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhāb launched a reformist campaign to purify Islam by rejecting what he viewed as heretical innovations.¹³ He denounced saint veneration, shrine visitation, and appeals to Imams as deviations from the practices of the *salaf*¹⁴ and, thus, deviating from the Quran.¹⁵ To realize this vision, he allied with the Saūd family, promising to legitimize their rule in return for their military support in spreading his doctrine.¹⁶ This pact withstood multiple Ottoman efforts to suppress it and ultimately laid the ideological foundation for the modern Saudi state.¹⁷ When Abd al-Azīz Al Saūd established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, Wahhabi clerics became the kingdom's official religious authorities, dominating positions as judges, imams, and educators.¹⁸ Petroleum wealth after 1950 transformed Wahhabism from a regional movement into a fully institutionalized state ideology.¹⁹ Oil revenues funded the creation of thousands of primary schools and major religious institutions such as the Islamic University of Medina and Imam Muhammad bin Saūd Islamic University in Riyadh — both of which were staffed by clerics trained in strict Wahhabi theology.²⁰ School curricula emphasized *tawhīd* and warned against *shirk* from an early age. Textbooks taught six-year-olds that celebrating the Prophet's birthday or seeking help from the dead was idolatrous (both major Shia traditions), while later graders explicitly labeled Shia mourning rituals (*Ashura*²¹) and shrine pilgrimages as prime examples of *bid'a*.²² By the 1980s, Wahhabi doctrine had been fully embedded in Saudi culture. Loyalty to the ruling Saūd family and rejection of “deviant sects” such as Shiism were presented in schools as religion and national duties, making sectarian exclusion a cornerstone of Saudi identity.²³

¹³ Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 45.

¹⁴ *Salaf* (lit. “pious predecessors”) refers to the first three generations of Muslims— the Prophet Muḥammad, his Companions, and their immediate successors— whose beliefs and practices Wahhabis claim must be emulated exactly, rejecting later theological or ritual developments as illegitimate.

¹⁵ Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab, *Kitab At-Tauhid: The Book of Monotheism*, trans. Mahmoud Ridha Murad (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam, 1791),

<https://kalamullah.com/Books/Kitab-At-Tauhid-The-Book-of-Monotheism-Sh.-Muhammad-bin-Abdul-Wahhab.pdf>

¹⁶ “1744 – The Holy Alliance.” *House of Saud: A Chronology*, PBS, 2005

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/cron/#:~:text=The%20Holy%20Alliance>

¹⁷ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

²¹ ‘*Ashūrā*’ is the 10th of Muḥarram, commemorating Imam Husayn's death at Karbalā; Shia mass-mourning rituals on this day are cited by Wahhabis as *bid'a*.

²² Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*.

²³ Ibid

KHOMEINISM AND IRAN

Meanwhile, across the Gulf, Iran was undergoing its own ideological transformation. Āyatollāh Ruhollah Khomeini, a senior Twelver Shia cleric, began teaching a radically new political theology that would come to be known as Khomeinism.²⁴ Rooted in classical Shia doctrine yet innovatively expanded, Khomeini's theory of *velāyat-e faqīh* held that in the absence of the Hidden Imam, a supreme cleric must govern in order to defend Islam and protect the oppressed.²⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, Khomeini's sermons attacked the reigning Pahlavi monarchy as corrupt and un-Islamic, and condemned the United States as "the Great Satan."²⁶ These messages resonated widely, particularly among students, clerics, and the urban working class.²⁷ When the Iranian Revolution erupted in 1979 and overthrew the shah, Khomeini assumed power and quickly installed *velāyat-e faqīh* as the backbone of the Islamic Republic's new constitution.²⁸ A sweeping cultural purge followed. The Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution removed pro-monarchy materials and reconstructed the national curriculum. Primary school readers glorified martyrdom in the tradition of *Karbalā*²⁹, civics books instructed students to resist Western "arrogance," and religious texts portrayed Wahhabism as a heretical sect fabricated by British agents and later co-opted by American interests.³⁰ These ideological developments did not go unnoticed in the West. CIA intelligence assessments in the early 1980s warned that Khomeini's revolutionary message could ignite sectarian unrest across the Middle East, particularly in countries with significant Shia populations, such as Iraq.³¹

²⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁵ Ibid

Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih)*, trans. Hamid Algar (Tehran: Alhoda, 2002).

²⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini, "We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology," *MERIP Reports*, no. 88 (June 1980): 20–22.

²⁷ Shorish, M. Mobin. "The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran," *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

²⁸ Ibid. Kasra Aarabi, "What Is *Velayat-e Faqih*?" Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 20 March 2019, <https://institute.global/policy/what-velayat-e-faqih>.

²⁹ *Karbalā* is the Iraqi city where Imam Husayn was killed (680 CE); Shia narratives invoke his martyrdom to sacralize modern struggles.

Imam Husayn (grandson of the Prophet) is a central martyr of Shi'ism; Iranian curricula present war deaths and the 1987 Hajj victims as emulating Husayn's sacrifice.

³⁰ Shorish, M. Mobin. "The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran." *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

Freedom House, "Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran's Textbooks," 27 March 2008, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2008/discrimination-and-intolerance-irans-textbooks>.

³¹ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, *The Politics of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini*, 20 November 1978, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T00634A000500010002-9.pdf>.

IRAN-IRAQ WAR

These preexisting ideological systems gave both governments a ready-made language for interpreting the war after Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980.³² Saddam aimed to seize the oil-rich *Khuzestan*³³ province, assert Iraqi dominance in the Persian Gulf, and contain the spread of revolutionary Shi'ism, which he feared might inspire rebellion among Iraq's large Shia population.³⁴ The conflict quickly escalated into one of the longest and bloodiest wars of the 20th century. Its outbreak deeply alarmed Saudi Arabia and pushed the kingdom into direct alignment with Saddam Hussein's secular *Ba'athist*³⁵ regime, despite their ideological differences. For the Saudi monarchy, the Iranian Revolution posed a far greater threat than communism or Arab nationalism had in previous decades. Khomeini's message of Shia resistance and clerical rule challenged not only the religious legitimacy of Wahhabism but the very foundations of the monarchy. His repeated calls to overthrow "un-Islamic" rulers resonated dangerously across the Gulf, especially among marginalized Shia populations in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which was both unstable and oil-rich.³⁶ Faced with the possibility of regional Shia uprisings and ideological backlash, Saudi Arabia viewed Iran's revolutionary regime as an existential threat. Supporting Iraq, then, was not merely about countering Iranian military power, it was a desperate bid to contain the spread of revolutionary Shi'ism and to reaffirm Sunni, Saudi-aligned dominance in the Gulf. The war thus became a proxy conflict, in which sectarian identities, geopolitical interests, and competing interpretations of Islam collided.

Immediately after Saddam Hussein's tanks crossed into Iran, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education issued emergency directives that same year instructing teachers to "clarify the danger of *Safavid*³⁷ heresy"—a thinly veiled reference to Iran—and to frame the kingdom's support for Iraq as a form of *jihād alā al-rafiḍa*.³⁸ By early 1981, new editions of *tawhīd* textbooks replaced generic condemnations of religious innovation with pointed critiques of Shia rituals, specifically focusing on the practice of *Tawassul*³⁹ and

³² Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³³ *Khuzestan* is Iran's oil-rich, Arab-majority border province that Saddam sought to annex in 1980, triggering the Iran-Iraq War and featuring heavily in Iranian "Sacred Defense" school narratives.

³⁴ Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*.

³⁵ *Ba'athism* was the secular Arab-nationalist ideology of Iraq's ruling party under Saddam Hussein, which nonetheless received Saudi backing as a Sunni counterweight to revolutionary Iran.

³⁶ Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*.

³⁷ The Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) made Twelver Shi'ism Iran's state religion; Wahhabi polemic labels modern Iranian Shi'a "Safavid" to imply political fabrication rather than authentic Islam.

³⁸ The phrase *jihād 'alā al-rāfiḍa* ("holy war against the Rejectionists") appears in Saudi wartime sermons urging support for Iraq and framing Iranian Shi'a as lawful enemies. *Jihad* is translated to "struggle" or "striving"; classical jurisprudence distinguishes *jihad al-akbar* (inner moral struggle) from *jihad al-asghar* (armed struggle), but wartime Saudi and Iranian textbooks stressed the latter as a military-religious duty. Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77-89, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/17639150.pdf>.

³⁹ *Tawassul* is the Shia (and Sufi) practice of seeking God's favor through the Prophet or Imams; Wahhabis condemn it as unscriptural mediation.

the use of *Turbah*⁴⁰ stones.⁴¹ In these revisions, Shias were explicitly labeled as *al-rafida*⁴², a derogatory term that translates to “those who reject,” this not only cast their beliefs as heretical but also justified their persecution and killing.⁴³ Social studies texts introduced in 1982 featured maps that depicted the Gulf as a Sunni heartland under threat from a rising Shia crescent, and Quran lessons increasingly emphasized verses warning against polytheism and heretical practices.⁴⁴ Teacher-training programs in Riyadh and Medina added modules on exposing “*Safavid distortions*,” and by mid-1982, state radio was pairing battlefield reports with ulamā commentaries urging donations to Iraq.⁴⁵ That same year, the Imām Muhammad bin Saūd University published a seven-volume paper titled *Khatar al-Rāfida*⁴⁶, which was distributed to secondary schools, often alongside scholarship incentives for students who memorized its contents.⁴⁷

Iran responded with a sweeping mobilization of its own. In the mid-1980s, the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution ordered all history, civic, and religious textbooks revised to reflect the new national ethos of *defā-e moqaddas*.⁴⁸ By 1981, fifth-grade readers were retelling the story of *Karbalā* with Iraqi tanks, American generals, and Wahhabi collaborators replacing *Yazīd*’s⁴⁹ cavalry.⁵⁰ Khomeini’s speeches, including his 1980 New Year’s address declaring neutrality in the war a sin, were incorporated into literature lessons.⁵¹ Schools screened short films of young martyrs, and by 1982, the government had

⁴⁰ A *turbah* is a small clay tablet—often from Karbalā, Iraq—that Shia worshippers place under the forehead in prayer to recall Imam Husayn’s martyrdom.

⁴¹ Ibid. Shorish, M. Mobin. “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran,” *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

⁴² *Al-Rāfida* (“the Rejecters”) is a derogatory Sunni epithet for Twelver Shi’ites, used in Wahhabi discourse to mark them as doctrinal outcasts.

⁴³ Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-SE), *Updated Review of Saudi Textbooks 2023-24* (Jerusalem: IMPACT-SE, 2023), <https://www.impact-se.org/saudi-arabia/>

⁴⁶ The danger of the rejectors.

⁴⁷ Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/17639150.pdf>.

⁴⁸ *Defā-e moqaddas* (“the Sacred Defense”) is Iran’s official term for the 1980–88 war, framing it as a divinely sanctioned struggle against aggression.

Iran Press Watch. “The 1980 Cultural Revolution and the Restrictions on Academic Freedom in Iran.” *Iran Press Watch*, 12 May 2019. <https://iranpresswatch.org/post/20819/1980-cultural-revolution-restrictions-academic-freedom-iran/>.

Shorish, M. Mobin. “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran,” *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

Freedom House, “Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran’s Textbooks,” 27 March 2008,

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2008/discrimination-and-intolerance-irans-textbooks>.

⁴⁹ Yazīd ibn Mu’āwiya (680–683 CE) was the Umayyad caliph whose forces killed Imam Husayn at the Battle of Karbalā in 680 CE; he is regarded in Shia tradition as a symbol of tyranny and illegitimate rule.

⁵⁰ *Iran Press Watch*. “The 1980 Cultural Revolution and the Restrictions on Academic Freedom in Iran.” *Iran Press Watch*, 12 May 2019. <https://iranpresswatch.org/post/20819/1980-cultural-revolution-restrictions-academic-freedom-iran/>.

⁵¹ Ruhollah Khomeini, “We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 88 (June 1980): 20–22. https://mideast-africa.tau.ac.il/sites/humanities.tau.ac.il/files/media_server/mideast_africa/untitled%20folder/Khomeini%20We%20Shall%20Confront%20the%20World%20with%20Our%20Ideology.pdf

Shorish, M. Mobin. “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran.” *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

Freedom House, “Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran’s Textbooks,” 27 March 2008,

formalized student enrollment into *Basij-e Danesh-Amūz*⁵² units, offering exam perks and ration coupons in return for service.⁵³ Arithmetic drills included casualty figures, and textbook margins featured martyr poetry.⁵⁴ In 1985, the Ministry of Education launched *Dars-hā-ye Jang*, a supplementary series combining tactical training and ideological instruction; by the late 1980s, it had circulated over one million copies, including through adult literacy programs.⁵⁵

1987 MECCA INCIDENT

The 1987 Mecca incident marked a major flashpoint in Saudi-Iranian tensions, both politically and ideologically, and was swiftly absorbed into the educational war each state was waging domestically. On July 31, 1987, during the annual *Hajj*⁵⁶ pilgrimage, a group of Iranian pilgrims organized a large political protest in Mecca against the United States and Israel, in line with the revolutionary doctrine of Khomeini, who had long promoted *Hajj* as a stage for anti-imperialist mobilization.⁵⁷ When the protest route deviated from its approved path, Saudi riot police responded with force.⁵⁸ The resulting violence left over 400 dead, mostly Iranians, but also Saudi riot police and pilgrims of other nationalities.⁵⁹ Both Saudi Arabia and Iran weaponized the tragedy, transforming it from a diplomatic crisis into an ideological episode that reinforced sectarian boundaries and justified the conflicting narratives already entrenched in their schools.⁶⁰

In Saudi Arabia, the government framed the event as a deliberate act of sacrilege. The Ministry of Education quickly issued internal bulletins condemning the protest as an Iranian plot to politicize and defile the sacredness of the *Hajj*.⁶¹ By 1988, these materials were adapted into official social studies lessons, which instructed students that the “safeguarding of the Two Holy Mosques” was not only a state

⁵² *Basij-e Dānesh-Āmūz* (“Student Basij”) is the volunteer youth wing that recruited schoolchildren for wartime civil-defense and ideological training.

The *Basij* (“Mobilisation”) is a mass volunteer militia founded by Khomeini that enrolls youths for ideological training and, during 1980-88, front-line or support roles.

⁵³ Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood,” *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–360.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Shorish, M. Mobin. “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran,” *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

⁵⁶ *Hajj* is the compulsory once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca that every able Muslim must perform.

⁵⁷ Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), 161–187.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood,” *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–360.

Shorish, M. Mobin. “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran,” *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58–75.

⁶¹ Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/17639150.pdf>.

Saudi Channel 1. “Hajj 1987 Clashes in Mecca – News Report.1987 1ج” YouTube video, 2:28, posted 5 August 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jYwIE_OUXE.

obligation but a religious imperative that justified aggressive action against any perceived attack.⁶² Iranian behavior during *Hajj* was portrayed as a national security threat, and references to the 1987 incident appeared in teacher-training seminars, religious broadcasts, and sermons curated by the state.⁶³ The violence was not treated as a one-time diplomatic crisis but as evidence of Shia aggression, reinforcing long-standing Wahhabi beliefs that Shia rituals and revolutionary slogans endangered the unity and sanctity of the Muslim world.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, in Iran, the deaths were cast as martyrdom in the face of Wahhabi oppression. Khomeini publicly condemned the Saudi monarchy as the “American house of Islam” and declared those killed in Mecca to be martyrs in a cosmic battle between “true” Islam and tyrannical usurpers.⁶⁵ The Iranian Ministry of Education revised religious and civic texts to incorporate the incident into a broader narrative of Sunni persecution of Shias throughout history, linking the Mecca deaths to the suffering of the Imams, especially *Husayn*.⁶⁶ Students were taught to venerate the fallen as symbols of resistance against injustice and were encouraged to emulate their loyalty to the revolution and their willingness to sacrifice.⁶⁷ Photographs of the dead, framed with Quran verses and revolutionary slogans, circulated in textbooks and classrooms.⁶⁸ The event was also used to reinforce anti-Saudi sentiment and deepen identification with the global Shia community.

The impact of the 1987 Mecca incident extended well beyond the immediate diplomatic fallout. While Iran temporarily suspended pilgrimages and Saudi Arabia reduced the number of Iranian visas, the more lasting consequence was the way each regime embedded the tragedy into its ideological infrastructure.⁶⁹ The educational reframing of the incident contributed to a hardened sectarian narrative: for Saudi students, Iranian pilgrims became symbols of subversion disguised in religious garb; for Iranian students, the Saudi state represented a continuation of historical injustice under a modern imperialist veil.⁷⁰

⁶²Saudi Channel 1. “Hajj 1987 Clashes in Mecca – News Report.1987 1ع” YouTube video, 2:28, posted 5 August 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jYwIE_OUXE.

Human Rights Watch. “*They Are Not Our Brothers*”: Hate Speech by Saudi Officials. New York: HRW, September 2017. http://hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/saudi0917_web.pdf

⁶³ Saudi Channel 1. “Hajj 1987 Clashes in Mecca – News Report.1987 1ع” YouTube video, 2:28, posted 5 August 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jYwIE_OUXE.

Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), 161–187.

⁶⁴ Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁶⁵ Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood,” *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–360.

⁶⁶ Freedom House, “Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran’s Textbooks,” 27 March 2008, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2008/discrimination-and-intolerance-irans-textbooks>.

⁶⁷ Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), 161–187. Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁶⁸ Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood,” *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 333–360.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Education, however, was not the only force driving Saudi-Iranian hostility. Territorial disputes, control over oil and the Gulf, regime security, fear of domestic unrest, and the immediate demands of war all shaped each state's behavior. Sectarian language could also be instrumental: by describing strategic choices as religious duties, both governments made dissent appear disloyal. It is therefore possible to interpret textbooks as reflections of a rivalry generated primarily by geopolitics rather than as its original cause. Yet even if schools did not create the conflict, they standardized its official meaning, repeated it across generations, and made political rivalry harder to separate from religious identity. Family, mosque, military service, radio, and direct wartime experience may also have influenced students more strongly than formal lessons, and the available evidence cannot isolate the effect of one textbook from those surrounding forces.

POSTWAR EFFECTS

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 did not bring ideological reconciliation—only the suspension of formal hostilities. Though Ayatollah Khomeini reluctantly accepted the UN ceasefire resolution, he infamously likened the decision to “drink from a poisoned chalice,” declaring that peace was a bitter necessity rather than a moral concession.⁷¹ This rhetoric set the tone for Iran's postwar narrative: the war may have ended militarily, but the ideological struggle, particularly against Saudi Arabia, remained unfinished. Educational institutions continued to cultivate a worldview in which Saudi Arabia was cast not merely as a geopolitical rival but as a religious and moral antagonist responsible for betraying the global Muslim community.⁷² Throughout the 1990s, Iran's Ministry of Education updated its textbooks to preserve the core themes developed during the war.⁷³ High school history and religious curricula framed the war as a defensive *jihad* against regional tyranny and imperialism, regularly citing Saudi Arabia's financial and ideological support for Iraq as proof of its complicity with the West.⁷⁴ The 1987 Mecca incident was emphasized in religious texts as evidence of Wahhabi brutality. Saudi Arabia was increasingly portrayed as an instrument of *este'kbar-e jahānni*.⁷⁵ Educational materials taught students that vigilance against Sunni oppression, especially in the form of Wahhabi ideology, was a religious duty.⁷⁶ This postwar curriculum helped shape the ideological worldview of a new generation of military

⁷¹ Negin Nabavi, *Modern Iran: A History in Documents* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016), 219–221.

⁷² Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood,” *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–360.

⁷³ Freedom House, “Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran's Textbooks,” 27 March 2008, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2008/discrimination-and-intolerance-irans-textbooks>.

⁷⁴ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 1–37.

⁷⁵ *Este'kbar-e jahānni* (“global arrogance”) is Iranian revolutionary shorthand for U.S.-led imperialism.

Saudi Channel 1. “Hajj 1987 Clashes in Mecca – News Report.1987 1ع” YouTube video, 2:28, posted 5 August 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jYwIE_OUXE.

⁷⁶ Michaela Prokop, “Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/17639150.pdf>

and political leaders, many of whom would later serve in the Quds Force⁷⁷, the Revolutionary Guard⁷⁸, and the Iranian advisory missions in Iraq and Lebanon.⁷⁹

In Saudi Arabia, the end of the war did little to alter the core sectarian framework embedded in its educational system. While the state avoided direct military engagement, it viewed the survival of the Islamic Republic as a strategic and religious defeat.⁸⁰ Throughout the 1990s, Saudi textbooks continued to teach certain Shia practices, such as *tawassul*, *ziyarah*⁸¹, and *Āshūrā* rituals, as impermissible and polytheistic.⁸² Though the most explicit terms like *mushrikūn* and *rafīda* were gradually softened due to pressure from international organizations, the underlying message persisted.⁸³ The themes were reinforced outside the classroom through mosque youth programs, summer religious camps, and state-controlled media.⁸⁴ Even after a brief warming of Saudi-Iranian relations in the late 1990s, textbooks remained cautious, often linking Iran to regional instability and religious deviation.⁸⁵

The long-term consequences of these postwar educational policies became increasingly visible by the early 2000s. In Iran, those who had absorbed wartime schooling and *Basij* training as children entered positions of authority in the Revolutionary Guard and the country's foreign policy apparatus.⁸⁶ Many of them oversaw Iran's growing support for Shia militias in Iraq and Lebanon, applying the sectarian logic first learned in the classroom to real-world conflict zones.⁸⁷ In Saudi Arabia, graduates of the 1980s schooling system staffed religious police units and worked in charitable foundations that distributed Wahhabi texts abroad—many of which echoed the anti-Shia messaging of domestic curricula.⁸⁸ Despite reform efforts that began after the 9/11 attacks, international textbook reviews in the early 2000s continued to find derogatory references to Shia practice.⁸⁹

⁷⁷ The Quds Force is the external-operations wing of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, tasked with supporting allied militias abroad under a narrative of exporting the revolution.

⁷⁸ Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), formed in 1979, is an ideologically vetted military parallel to the regular army, controlling the Basij and Quds Force.

⁷⁹ Shervin Malekzadeh, "Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood," *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–360.

⁸⁰ Harvard Kennedy School Student Review, "Sectarianism and Conflict: Legacies of the Iran–Iraq War," *HKS Student Review*, April 21 2018,

<https://studentreview.hks.harvard.edu/sectarianism-and-conflict-legacies-of-the-iran-iraq-war/>

⁸¹ *Ziyārah* ("visitation") denotes pilgrimage to saints' or Imams' shrines—celebrated in Shi'a devotion but labelled idolatrous in Wahhabi teaching.

⁸² United States House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum*, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., hearing, July 19 2017,

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20170719/106289/HHRG-115-FA18-Transcript-20170719.pdf>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89,

<https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/17639150.pdf>

⁸⁵ United States House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum*, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., hearing, July 19 2017,

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⁸⁶ Shervin Malekzadeh, "Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood," *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–360.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77–89.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, forged during the Iran-Iraq War, did not end with a ceasefire. The 1987 Mecca incident, in which hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were killed during a protest, offers a stark example of how real-world violence was repurposed as sectarian ammunition.⁹⁰ In Saudi Arabia, it became a warning against Shia subversion in sacred space; in Iran, it was memorialized as martyrdom at the hands of a heretical regime.⁹¹ That such an incident was integrated into national curricula illustrates the extent to which education was mobilized to harden sectarian worldviews and justify political enmity. The long-term consequences of this propaganda have been profound. The students of the 80s, shaped by narratives of *jihad al-rafida* or *defa-e moqaddas*, are now commanders, clerics, and policymakers in their respective states.⁹² The framing of the war and its aftermath in ideological rather than political terms has made reconciliation far more difficult, as compromise is not merely discouraged but depicted as a betrayal of divine truth.⁹³ Proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen cannot be fully understood without accounting for the educational infrastructures that taught generations to view the opposing sect as an existential threat.⁹⁴ This matters because the persistence of sectarian violence in the Middle East is not incidental, but structural. It is the outcome of decades of ideological formation at the level of childhood education.⁹⁵ Any path toward regional stability must begin not only with diplomacy or disarmament, but with the reexamination of the narratives that have defined Islam, nationhood, and enmity since the first schoolbooks of the Iran-Iraq War.

United States House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum*, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., hearing, July 19 2017,

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20170719/106289/HHRG-115-FA18-Transcript-20170719.pdf>

⁹⁰ Martin Kramer, "Khomeini's Messengers in Mecca," in *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996), 161-187. <https://martinkramer.org/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>

⁹¹ Ibid. Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2003): 77-89.

Shervin Malekzadeh, "Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood," *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339-360.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Harvard Kennedy School Student Review, "Sectarianism and Conflict: Legacies of the Iran-Iraq War," *HKS Student Review*, April 21 2018,

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⁹⁴ Ibid.

Shervin Malekzadeh, "Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood," *CSSAAME* 32, no. 2 (2012): 339-360.

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⁹⁵ Ibid.

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