

Futures Studies in Iran: The Past and the Future

by Alireza Hejazi

Introduction: Cultural and Psychological Roots of Futurism in Iran

The geographical and political situations of Iran, especially in recent centuries have been such that “knowing the future” has been a necessity for both ordinary citizens and their rulers. Iran has always been under the shadow of foreign powers’ invasion or internal uprisings.¹ So having a general view of the future at all times has been an attractive social matter. On the other hand, independent studies of Iranian civilization show that religion has been a strong driving force in shaping the culture and even the psychology of Iranians.

From historical and religious points of view, there are significant backgrounds for futurism in Iranian civilization. For instance, around 3,000 years ago the religious teachings of Zoroaster, father of ancient Persian religion, embraced a doctrine of futurism in the shape of hope for a final redeemer called: “Soshiant” or “The Promised One” who would guide later generations to light and justice. This same hope can be found in subsequent religions such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam, which all contributed in their ways to Iranian moral beliefs. So having a hopeful perspective about the future and waiting eagerly for the coming of a “Soshiant,” “Messiah,” “Christ” or “Mahdi” has been integral to the historical and

religious dimensions of Iranian society for over three millennia.

The prominence of Islam during the last 10 centuries provided new trends of futurism in Iranian society, which crystallized mainly in the form of a new understanding of Islamic teachings called “Sufism.” The basic idea of Iranian Sufis was to concentrate on knowing the most High and Supreme Source of being rather than remaining occupied with debating Islamic doctrine and rules (Shariah).

Sufis eagerly sought a higher understanding of Islamic doctrines relating to the future of theological knowledge and the future quality of human lives. Their new ideology grasped the attention of Iranian thinkers including well-known poets such as “Attar” and “Molana” who became famous for the mystic ideas portrayed in their poems.

Attar (c. 1146-1220) described the important futuristic theme of “vision building” in a spiritual way in his book “*Manteq-o-teyr*” or “The Logic of Flight.” Here he tells the story of a hoopoe bird whose dream was to reach a mountain called “Qaf” and find the great king of birds called “Simorq” or “30 Birds.” The hoopoe convinces all the birds of the earth to form a group and seek Simorq together. They face many difficulties in their travels, and by the time they at last reach Qaf Mountain, only 30 birds remain alive. They finally

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come to understand that “Simorq” for whom they have endured all the hardships of travel is their own 30-member group—that they themselves are the real “Simorq” or “30 Birds.”

Some years later, another Sufi poet, Molana (also known as Rumi), described a quality that today can be recognized as the process of scenario building in a mystic theme he called “*Haft Shahr-e Eshq*” or “Seven Cities of Love.” He may have taken this idea from the story of “*Haft Khan-e Rostam*” or “Rostam’s Seven Valleys” in the *Shahnameh* (The Book of the Kings), written in verse three centuries before Molana’s era by another great Iranian poet, Ferdowsi. Molana said that in order to reach reality a Sufi should pass through seven cities or phases. He believed that Attar had passed these cities during his earthly life. The seven cities or phases are called: “*Talab*” (Quest), “*Sabr*” (Patience), “*Tavakol*” (Trust), “*Heirat*” (Surprise), “*Reza*” (Consent), “*Fana*” (Doom), and “*Baqa*” (Survival).

These same phases may be recognized as the seven steps we usually take in building scenarios: deciding the question, identifying the drivers, ranking the drivers, deciding the axes for the scenarios, drafting the scenarios, testing the scenarios, and considering the implications of the scenarios.² It may sound surprising, but the fact is that Sufis like Molana were instinctively building scenarios to reach their spiritual goals.

There are also some examples of forecasting in the history of Iran, including those forecasts that Shah Soltan Hossein Safavi, one of the kings in the Safavi family, made concerning the probable invasion of Ashraf-e Afghan, an Afghani ruler who occupied Isfahan the capital of Iran several centuries ago.³ Although his foresight came true, he and others never used scientific approaches in forecasting the future. They usually calculated future situations using traditional methods and their personal experience of politics and governance. Fortunately, the history of Iran shows that superstitious methods and augurs gained little fol-

lowing among intellectual Iranians, but a strong interest in knowing the future was very evident among different classes of Iranian society in past times.

Iranians, impressed by the consequences of the industrial revolution and scientific advances in Europe, and by reports from students who had studied at western universities and colleges, gradually became acquainted with new philosophies, including futurist ones, during the past two centuries. New ways of thought became a brilliant trend among Iranian thinkers, especially those who pioneered in building a new society in the Qajar era and finally made a social-political reform called “*Mashrootiyat*” or “Conditionality.”⁴

The Conditionality can be considered a futurist movement for the way it reflects the historical demand of the Iranians for a better life and future. Throughout this formative era, many methods of thinking created in different social, religious, political and even economical dimensions of Iranian society all somehow connected to become futuristic thinking. Some were successful in attracting audiences and keeping them in an active mood and some were not. The battle between becoming a futurist or a reactionary (a person who thinks everyone should remain loyal to old traditions) continues throughout the different layers of Iranian society even today.

Contemporary Iranian Futures Studies

In the modern era, futures studies began in Iran a half century ago. In the 1950s, seven- and five-year development plans were the primary forms of futures studies conducted in Iran. But the most significant foresight job done here was “the Iranian Economic Outlook” prepared in 1962 to forecast economic conditions in the country until 1987. This foresight study was based on information from past studies that attempted to trace economic trends into the next decades. The administrative framework in which this foresight

study got prepared was Iran's third development plan, which suffered from certain deficiencies, such as assuming a fixed rate of 6% for economic growth over the next 25 years.⁵

The above-mentioned foresight study was conducted by a group of Iranian graduates and planners gathered in an organization called "*Sazman-e Barnameh va Boodjeh*" or "The Organization for Planning and Budget" who laid the cornerstone of futures studies in Iranian society. They offered their services directly to government for futures planning in the country. These young Iranians, who had mainly studied in American and European universities, were interested in applying what they had learned to make better and more sustainable futures for their nation. The main goal of the Organization for Planning and Budget was to use appropriate planning techniques and other futuristic methods (like scenario building) to conduct better studies in planning optimum futures for the country.

A second landmark work on foresight was the Iranian Economic Outlook, carried out within the framework of the country's fifth development plan in 1973 and containing forecasts covering the next 20 years. This work was better than the first one, and embraced more scientific considerations. Two years later this foresight study was revised by the Organization for Planning and Budget to reflect the increase in world oil prices and changes in economic estimates and also in the rate of population growth. In the 1970s, some foresight studies were conducted jointly by Tehran International Institute for Political and Economic Researches, the Organization for Planning and Budget, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to envision different futures for Iran.

The turbulent years of the Islamic Revolution and, immediately after that, the war with Iraq (which had invaded Iran) left no good opportunity for thinking about the future patiently. Nevertheless, after the Islamic Revolution foresight

activities were crystallized in the shape of the First Program for Economic, Social and Cultural Development, which covered a period from 1989 to 1993.

After the Iraq war, thinking and planning for the future emerged as a real and serious field of study among the Iranian elite and even some members of the government. By 1998, when planning for the future by the Iranian government passed the half-century mark, a growing tendency to study the future made governmental and private institutes build think tanks in which Iranian thinkers might be able to offer their thoughts and ideas on a more scientific basis. Many foresight projects were outsourced by the government to study different dimensions of the future, including defense, politics, economics, science and technology, culture, and society.

The second Program for Economic, Social and Cultural Development set a 10-year horizon based on previous program and studies covering the period from 1994 to 2004. The outcomes of these studies were reflected in some other plans such as "Systemizing the Country's Economy," "An Oil-free Economy" and "The Iranian 1404 Vision" visioning the future conditions of Iran in 2025 and beyond. This so-called vision, which can be regarded as the official vision of the current Iranian government, is actually more an ideal rather than a realistic one. The vision embraces a set of especially competitive goals that seek to define the future status of Iran in the Middle East and the world. Although serious challenges to realizing the goals mentioned in this vision remain, the Iranian government hopes to succeed in conducting its programs exactly as they have been planned.

The Iranian 1404 Vision inspired another plan named as "The Land Logistics Plan" at provincial level. According to this plan, a set of studies was organized and conducted to build provincial futures. The relative conduct of these studies has been overshadowed by the performance of later cabinets.

Iran is a country naturally wrestling with earthquake and other unexpected disasters. Some studies have been made to reduce the impact of such destructive events on the country and its people. Organizations like fire stations, municipalities, Red Cross relief centers and others have been besieged to draw foresight plans for the times of crisis. Even an organization for managing the crises caused by unexpected and natural disasters has been established, but how effective such efforts can be in real situations remains a matter of concern.

In another futuristic effort made by the Iranians is a plan called "A Pilot of Best Future Technologies." For this, a group of Iranian scientists were asked to determine the most urgent technologies that the country will need in coming years. Perhaps this plan may be considered one of the most useful foresight programs ever conducted in Iran. Since the forecast team conducting the requested foresight had an academic perspective, the outcome was a satisfactory map of the most needed technologies that the Iranians might require in years to come. The results of this map were incorporated in different organizations and companies in both general and private sections.

Futures Studies in Practice

Despite a great deal of interest in thinking about the future among Iranians, especially those of college age, futures studies have so far had only a small role in shaping major decisions made in the country regarding the future of economics, politics, society, culture, science, and technology. This is mainly because of the traditional nature of Iranian social identity. Many Iranians do not yet take the potential capabilities of futures studies seriously in solving their contemporary problems.

On the other hand, the lack of educated futurists who may be familiar with core futuristic thoughts and principles is a serious gap within Iran's decisive bodies. Today a significant num-

ber of Iranian managers and strategists are working in different levels of the society, but few of them are familiar with the basics of futures studies. Finding a futurist manager in an organization can be a difficult task for those sociologists who may wish to study Iran's present organizational structure.

Current interest and enthusiasm for futures studies among the Iranian young people shows that Iran has a remarkable capacity for future thinking and innovation in futuristic fields of science and technology.

Because of this capacity, an increasing willingness to design and conduct academic programs on futures studies has appeared at Iranian universities and higher education institutes. In the light of relentless efforts made by some Iranian intellectuals, futures studies have achieved academic legitimacy as a field of study in some Iranian universities. Doctoral students are being nurtured as futurists at Imam Khomeini International University, for example and plans have been made to design and offer courses on futures studies in MA and BA levels at Payam-e Noor University, Malek-e Ashtar University of technology and Islamic Azad University. The hopeful prospect of these efforts shows that Iran can be an attractive market for producers of futures studies textbooks, journals, databases and other educational materials now and in the future.

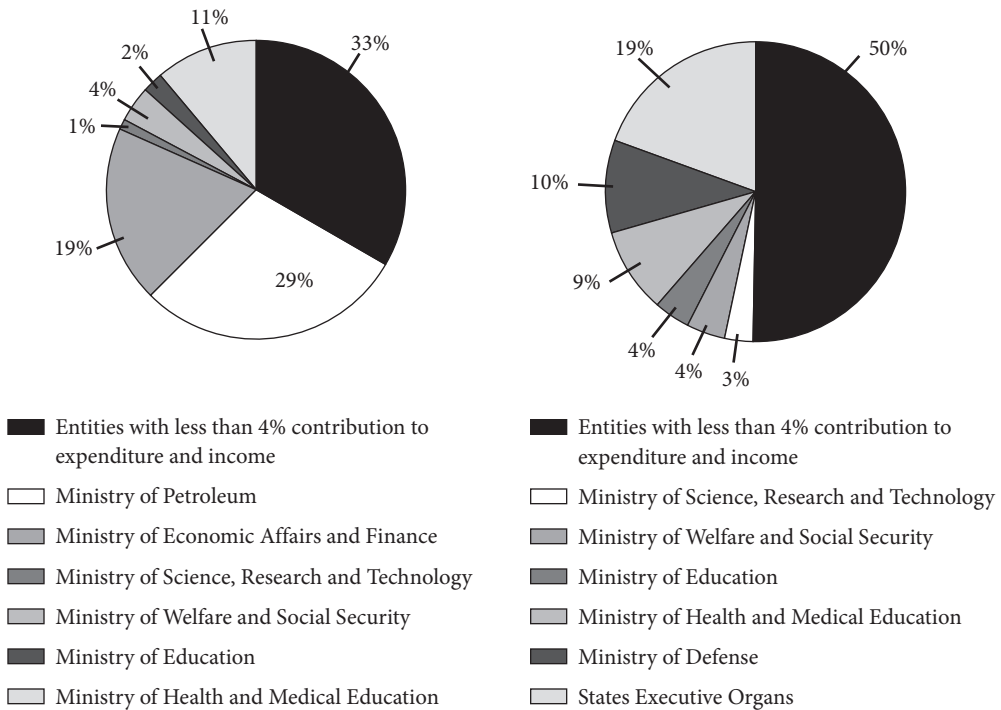
Futures Studies Challenges in Iran

Like all scientific activities, futures studies need adequate financial support to succeed in achieving desired goals for the nation. RAND's review of Iranian government revenue and spending on science, research and technology in 2007 reveals a significant problem.⁶ As seen in following diagrams (Figure 1), the contribution of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology is only between one and three percent in both revenue and spending sectors. It seems that in recent years Iran has devoted insufficient financial re-

Figure 1.
Flow of Funds (Revenue and Spending) in the Iranian Government, 2007

Projected Government Revenue, 2007

Projected Government Spending, 2007



Source: RAND

sources to scientific research activities including futures studies.

Regardless of these financial shortcomings in support of research in the area of futures, lack of the psychology of working together as a team is another challenge that Iranian futures researchers face. Individual thinking and research have been encouraged in Iran from the distant past until today. But Iranians have little experience in doing research jobs together. This situation is due to cultural and social behaviors usually seen within the contemporary Iranian society. Social interaction—including research and education—closely follow patterns of individual behavior in Iran.

Another challenge for futures studies in Iran is the lack of a democratic atmosphere for thinking about the future and coming to firm decisions. Since the nature of decision making in Iran is government-based, all roads lead to Rome—that is, the government alone decides about the future of the nation and its people. Only those futurists who agree to offer futures consultations to the government can provide it with suggestions about the best direction that that the country should move toward. Yet there is no guarantee that any of their suggestions will be accepted by the government and put into practice.

On the other hand, having a clear understanding of what futures studies are not, is an important step that should be taken by Iranian futurists. From a long time in the past many Iranians have traditionally thought in terms of seers and necromancers who predicted the future correctly or wrongly. This image is alive even today in the minds of many who have little knowledge about future thinking and studies. Even among intellectuals, there are some who believe that the future is pre-determined and do not take futures studies seriously. Some others have a vague combination of modern futures studies and supernatural prediction in their minds. Many theories of futures studies remain unknown among Iranian intellectuals. Sometimes futures studies issues are taken wrongly to be management and strategic issues. There is a growing need to shape scientific effort in order to guide correctly the general state of knowledge about futures studies in Iran. This is a vital need and should be taken serious especially by those futurists who are concerned with developing futuristic values in developing countries including Iran.

Conclusion

From an historical point of view there is significant background for futures thinking in Iranian civilization. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam each made a lasting contribution to futures thinking in the religious dimension of the society by stressing the importance of coming saviors like "Soshiant," "Messiah," "Christ" or "Mahdi." The prominence of Islam in Iran over the last 10 centuries led to further new trends related to the future such as "Sufism." The appearance of ideas like "30 Birds" and "The Seven Cities of Love" are examples of these trends. In recent times, Iranians, impressed by the industrial revolution, scientific advances, and reports from students who had studied in the West, have made futures thinking a brilliant trend among Iranian intellectuals. There have been remarkable

efforts made to focus public attention on prospects for the future.

In the modern era, efforts to promote futures thinking in Iran can be divided in two parts: before and after the Islamic revolution. In each part some good advances have been made in developing and using futures studies. Although there is a growing interest in designing and conducting futures studies at Iranian universities, there are also major challenges, such as: insufficient financial resources, lack of team work, weakness of democratic atmosphere, and a lack of knowledge about what futures studies are not. Yet, overall it seems that the students being nurtured as futurists at some Iranian universities are learning to think appropriately about the future of the country in all its different dimensions: economy, society, politics, education, science, and technology.

Resources

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