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# Between Rebellion and Obedience: The Making of Docile Revolutionary Children in Post-Revolutionary Iran's *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā*

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## Abstract

This article examines the challenges of subject formation within state-building efforts by analyzing *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* (Children's Universe), a widely circulated Iranian children's magazine during the post-revolutionary period. Through analyzing the magazine's content from 1979 to 1989, when the Islamic Republic was consolidating its power and building institutions, this study reveals how the publication served as a key informal education platform, attempting to create politically conscious yet ideologically compliant young citizens. While the magazine aimed to cultivate revolutionary consciousness through anti-imperialist rhetoric and Islamic values, it simultaneously imposed rigid behavioral and ideological boundaries to produce what I term “docile revolutionary children.” The research demonstrates how political themes permeated every aspect of the magazine—from stories and poems to puzzles and contests—transforming it from an entertainment platform into a vehicle for political socialization. Through examination of revolutionary and wartime discourses, gender representation, and the promotion of social humility, this study argues that *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* embodied a fundamental tension in the state's vision of ideal citizenship: the simultaneous demand for revolutionary agency and absolute submission to clerical authority. This research contributes to our understanding of how post-revolutionary states employ cultural institutions to shape young citizens and the inherent contradictions in such efforts at political socialization.

**Keywords:** childhood studies; docile citizens; ethical state; Iran; Islamic Revolution; political socialization; revolutionary children; subject formation

The relationship between revolutionary states and their youngest citizens embodies a fundamental paradox: how to create subjects who are simultaneously independent-minded and obedient, militant, and disciplined. This tension manifested across various revolutionary contexts – from Soviet Russia to China and Cuba – but took on unique dimensions in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>1</sup> This article examines this dynamic through *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* (Children's Universe), Iran's most widely circulated children's magazine, which played

<sup>1</sup> See Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the New Man: From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Theodore MacDonald, *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1986); Ernesto Che Guevara, *Man and Socialism in Cuba* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969).

a crucial yet understudied role in the Islamic Republic's efforts to shape young minds beyond the bounds of formal education.<sup>2</sup> During the formative post-revolutionary period, 1979–1989, as the Islamic Republic consolidated its power, *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* transformed from a source of entertainment into a powerful tool for ideological education. With a weekly readership surpassing 300,000 by 1982, the magazine became central to the state's broader project of molding young minds. This study's analysis of *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā*'s content over the decade reveals how the magazine sought to create what I term “docile revolutionary children” – youth who were politically engaged and revolutionary in spirit yet ideologically compliant and obedient in practice. This paradox highlights the inherent contradictions in the state's project of shaping young citizens to be both agents of change and subjects of control.

*Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* was first published in 1956 amid the politically repressive climate that followed the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. Unlike the relatively free press of the 1940s, the post-coup period was dominated by state-controlled outlets after the regime jailed or executed numerous journalists and shut down ninety-two publications.<sup>3</sup> In this context, *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* was launched as the first state-sponsored children's magazine with a mission, as described by its editor-in-chief Abbas Yamini-Sharif, to “entertain and amuse children through fables, games, and puzzles.”<sup>4</sup> The cover of the first issue (Figure 1) suggested that exciting tales and legends written for children awaited in the magazine's pages. Published by Iran's largest publishing house, the Keyhan firm, the magazine quickly gained popularity with a weekly circulation of 50,000 copies, reaching both middle-class urban children and lower-middle-class readers nationwide.

Following the 1979 Revolution, *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* (hereafter *KB*) was preserved but radically reframed to promote revolutionary ideals. New leadership took control of the Keyhan publishing house after months of internal conflict, expelling both leftists and staff affiliated with the former regime. This led to the removal of twenty journalists who were replaced with staff loyal to the ruling clerics.<sup>5</sup> As a result, *KB*, too, underwent a radical transformation. In January 1979, a few weeks before the Pahlavi monarchy collapsed, the magazine embraced the revolution with a cover featuring a veiled girl holding a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini (Figure 2). Two weeks later, *KB* published an image of Khomeini's return to Iran, signaling support for his leadership. Yet, this shift was not sufficient for the revolutionary leaders, who replaced *KB*'s lifetime editor with twenty-one-year-old pro-Khomeini revolutionary Daryush Noruzi.<sup>6</sup> Soon after, the magazine added the subtitle *Barā-ye Bachcheh-hā-ye Enqelab* (For the Children of the Revolution).

This transformation extended to the magazine's content and mission, making fiction central to the political struggle. In 1976, two years before the revolution, fiction made up 95 percent of *KB*, with 96 percent of these stories being translated from such American

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have examined the Islamic Republic's attempts to shape revolutionary subjects primarily through formal education, particularly via school textbooks. See Shervin Malekzadeh, “Schooled to Obey, Learning to Protest: The Ambiguous Outcomes of Postrevolutionary Schooling in the Islamic Republic of Iran” (Ph.D. thesis, Georgetown University, 2011); Golnar Mehran, “Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1989): 35–50.

<sup>3</sup> Farid Ghasemi, *History of Iranian Journalism*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Cahp va Nashr, 2000), 637–52.

<sup>4</sup> Editorial Team, “Why Was This Magazine Published?,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 1, December 27, 1956, 3–4.

The idea of an ideologically neutral media outlet is a myth; all media carry ideological influence. Some take a subtle approach while others are explicit. The shift in *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* before and after the revolution reflects changes in both form and content: before the revolution, it subtly promoted Western and European values, whereas afterward, it explicitly advocated revolutionary and Islamic norms with marked intensity – a theme explored further in the following sections.

<sup>5</sup> Hossein Shahidi, *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 38.

<sup>6</sup> For a few months, Vahid Nikkhah-Azad, a twenty-four-year-old pro-Khomeini revolutionary artist and filmmaker, was editor-in-chief of *KB* before Daryush Noruzi took control of the magazine in 1980.



Figure 1. Cover page of the first issue of *KB*, December 27, 1956. A state-sponsored children's magazine focused on entertainment and fun under Editor-in-chief Abbas Yamini-Sharif. Source: KB Archive.



**Figure 2.** Cover page of KB during the revolution, January 25, 1979. The magazine signals its revolutionary alignment with a veiled girl holding Ayatollah Khomeini's portrait. Source: KB Archive.

and European writers as Edgar Rice Burroughs, the American writer of *Tarzan of the Apes*; Rudyard Kipling, the English author of *The Jungle Book*; and Georges Remi, the Belgian author of *The Adventures of Tintin*. In stark contrast, the new editorial team condemned such “filthy stains” (*lakkeh-hā-ye cherkin*) of Western literature, emphasizing that fiction must now deliver “Islamic and revolutionary values to children.”<sup>7</sup> Fiction was criticized as a tool that promoted Western superiority and contempt for non-Western cultures. In a pointed editorial, KB confronted the character of Tarzan as a symbol of European colonialism and white conquest in Africa, declaring:

Yes, I’m talking to you, Tarzan. It is time to go home. You and your American and European friends looted everything and made life miserable for us. I’m really tired of seeing you and hearing your shout. Do you remember that you and your friends tried to make us look like savages and cannibals while saying you were kind and civilized? Well, guess what? Neither I nor the oppressed children of the world will be fooled

<sup>7</sup> “A Memorable Magazine for Five Generations,” *Fars News*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13981019000825/>.

anymore. We know now that you are all a bunch of liars, looters, and criminals. That's why you get kicked out of places. So, go away from my home, Tarzan. I don't want to see you anymore.<sup>8</sup>

The editorial, often harsh and linguistically complex for *KB*'s target audience of nine- to thirteen-year-olds, clearly marked *KB*'s drastic ideological shift. Fiction content sharply declined to 26 percent, with only 10 percent consisting of translated stories.<sup>9</sup> Instead, new sections appeared, including "Conversation between You and Me" as the editorial, explaining political concepts to young readers; "From Imam's Speech," featuring Khomeini's addresses; "History of Islam," highlighting key Islamic figures throughout history; and "The Revolution's Leaders," focusing on the revolutionary figures' speeches. While the magazine viewed children as essential to sustaining the revolutionary spirit for future generations, it also saw them as vulnerable to competing ideologies, asserting its responsibility to shield them from external influences. In "Conversation between You and Me," the editor addressed this duty directly:

When I first became the editor of *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā*, I thought about sharing happy stories with you – maybe about a vase of flowers behind a window or a girl watering her garden. But then I realized there's something even more important we need to talk about. Sometimes, there are bad people out there, like wolves and sneaky foxes, who want to destroy the Islamic Republic. It's important for me to familiarize you with them and their plots so you can fight against them.<sup>10</sup>

In a world filled with "wolves," "sneaky foxes," and "bad people" poised to threaten the Islamic Republic, lighthearted entertainment in *KB* gave way to an intensified focus on political socialization. As the editor later recounted, *KB* aimed to "foster [*tarbiyat konad*] revolutionary children."<sup>11</sup> To realize this, the magazine was reimagined as a deeply politicized platform where revolutionary and religious themes permeated every aspect – from stories and poems to puzzles and contests. *KB* thus became a central tool in the state's project of subject formation, cultivating an ideal of "revolutionary children" who were politically conscious yet ideologically compliant. However, this vision exposed an inherent paradox: the aim to produce "docile revolutionary children" – youth encouraged to develop political consciousness and proactive spirit while simultaneously being conditioned to submit to clerical authority, conform to social hierarchies, and accept economic hardship. This tension in *KB* reflects the broader tensions inherent in the state's citizen-building efforts.

*KB*'s transformation was integral to the newly founded state's broader strategy to establish ideological control and shape ideal citizens. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides a useful lens for understanding how the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic sought to achieve dominance not only through formal educational institutions but also cultural outlets, such as *KB*. For Gramsci, hegemony represents the dominance of one group's worldview over others through cultural consent rather than mere coercion. Within this framework, *KB* served as a crucial instrument in this hegemonic project. The magazine transcended its original role as an entertainment platform to become a powerful tool for ideological education, working to legitimize the state's values and sustain its revolutionary

<sup>8</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 267, December 4, 1984, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Masumeh Bagheri-Khangah, "A Comparative Analysis of *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā*'s Content in 1976 and 1986," *Journal of Children and Adolescent Literature* 8 (1997): 81.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 73, January 16, 1981, 3. All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>11</sup> "Remembrance of Amir Hossein Fardi: The Father of *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā*," *Keyhan*, April 28, 2018, <https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/131026>.



agenda. By ideology, I mean both conscious and unconscious meaning-making processes permeating cultural institutions such as *KB*.<sup>12</sup> In this role, *KB* functioned as a form of informal education, deliberately cultivating young revolutionaries who were expected to embody political awareness and activism.

The analysis in this study contributes to broader scholarly discussions on identity formation in post-revolutionary Iran by examining how *KB* reflects a profound ideological transformation. Rather than simply replacing Western norms with traditional Islamic values, *KB* contributed to the state's systematic reinterpretation and reinvention of Shi'i concepts and symbols for political purposes, as Hamid Dabashi argues in *Theology of Discontent* regarding the Islamic Republic's ideology.<sup>13</sup> In this context, *KB* repurposed traditional religious narratives to serve as tools for children's political education, aligning them with the state's revolutionary objectives. By promoting Islamic and revolutionary values, the magazine became part of a broader project to create an "authentic modernity" or "Islamic modernity," seeking to shape revolutionary subjects who embodied a new Islamic way of life.<sup>14</sup> This study reveals how the tension between religious authenticity and revolutionary transformation shaped *KB*'s vision of the ideal child citizen.

The magazine's systematic efforts to shape new ideal children exemplify what Gramsci described as the "ethical state," characterized by a state functioning "to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level."<sup>15</sup> In this framework, the state takes on an educational and moral role, using its cultural organs and civil society institutions – such as the media and popular culture – to shape citizens and secure their consent. In post-revolutionary Iran, this ethical role became especially significant, as the revolutionary leaders framed the 1979 Revolution as an alternative vision – one that wove spirituality and ethics into the fabric of political and social life, moving beyond their relegation to the private sphere. This ethico-spiritual character was reflected in the invocation of Islamic values not only as a unifying source of collective identity but also a foundation for cultivating new forms of subjectivity. These subjectivities aimed to envision a radically different future, grounded in communal solidarity and spiritual principles.<sup>16</sup> *KB* exemplified this fusion of political and spiritual education, particularly its editorial section "Conversation between You and Me," where religious rituals such as fasting were reframed as acts of revolutionary resistance against American imperialism, teaching children that "we are ready to fast but not to surrender to America."<sup>17</sup>

While formal schooling is traditionally viewed as the primary venue of this function, Gramsci recognized the existence of multiple channels through which the state performs its educative role, including popular culture. *KB* exemplified this process, operating as an extension of state efforts to shape children's worldviews beyond the formal classroom. The magazine's editorials, political content, stories, games, and puzzles all worked together to reconfigure children's understanding of the revolution, their place in society, and their responsibilities to the state. By cultivating a consciousness grounded in Islamic and revolutionary values, *KB* contributed to constructing a collective identity that advanced the ethical mission of the state.

<sup>12</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Ali Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 258.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion of "political spirituality" and Michel Foucault's efforts to conceptualize it with regards to the Iranian revolution, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 45, July 22, 1980, 4.

However, the state's adoption of an ethical role serves to not only guide but also regulate populations by establishing frameworks of normality and deviance that individuals internalize, ultimately governing themselves within these norms. As Foucault argued, modern power functions not through overt repression alone but by shaping individuals' conduct, attitudes, and self-perceptions. Through this process, subjects internalize disciplinary mechanisms, becoming "docile" citizens who regulate their own behavior and way of thinking according to the dominant power's norms.<sup>18</sup> When necessary, the state breaks the limits and reinforces this ethical role by applying authoritarian and institutional power to maintain its influence and control.<sup>19</sup>

*KB* operated as a critical tool within this disciplinary framework. While it ostensibly cultivated political consciousness, it simultaneously sought to produce docile subjects through a carefully constructed system of behavioral and ideological controls. The magazine promoted specific forms of political participation – such as attending revolutionary events and resisting American imperialism – while simultaneously demanding strict obedience to state authority, clerical leadership, revolutionary values, and hierarchal social values and norms. This created a circumscribed space for children's agency, where political engagement was encouraged only within rigid boundaries of acceptable thought and behavior, producing a fundamental tension between revolutionary activism and political subordination. The result was the promotion of "docile revolutionary children."

This study analyzes *KB*'s content during the pivotal decade of 1979–1989, a period that proved crucial to both the Islamic Republic's consolidation and *KB*'s transformation into an ideological tool. This era marked the most intensive phase of state-building, bracketed by two watershed moments: the revolution itself and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, which coincided with the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the amendment of the constitution. Several factors make this period particularly significant for studying *KB*'s role in shaping young minds. First, a series of political crises – the hostage crisis (1979–1981), the Iraqi invasion (1980), and the violent suppression of opposition groups (1981–1983) – allowed the state to rally popular support while systematically eliminating competing voices and visions.<sup>20</sup> Second, Khomeini's charismatic leadership during this decade provided ideological coherence to the broader state project of creating new revolutionary subjects. Third, this period saw the systematic transformation of cultural institutions, as the state sought to reshape civil society through the Islamization of the public sphere. As the country's only nationwide children's magazine, *KB* underwent a dramatic reinvention during these years, shifting from an entertainment-focused outlet to a powerful ideological apparatus. Supported by the Keyhan publishing house's extensive distribution network and the magazine's presence in school and public libraries, *KB* played a crucial role in the informal education of children. Operating outside yet complementing the formal school system, the magazine became particularly effective at transmitting revolutionary values and shaping the political consciousness of young readers.

The 1990s brought significant change to Iran's children's media landscape, with new competitors – such as *Soroush-e Nojavān*, *Roshd*, and *Docharkheh* – challenging *KB*'s dominance. In response, *KB* sought to modernize by improving production quality and gradually shifting from exclusively revolutionary Islamic content to incorporating nationalist themes

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–83* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> This is where the limits of Foucault's analysis of the Iranian Revolution become evident. Despite his extensive work on various forms of power and suppression, he failed to fully recognize the potential implications and consequences of the politics of spirituality. See Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 134–74; Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 773–850.

to appeal to the post-war generation. Despite these efforts, *KB* struggled to maintain its readership. By the late 1990s, its circulation had declined significantly, as younger audiences increasingly viewed it as outdated.<sup>21</sup> Because of these developments and this article's limited scope, this study focuses specifically on the 1979–1989 period, which marks the peak of *KB*'s influence and ideological coherence.<sup>22</sup>

In the following, this study looks at four key dimensions of *KB*'s role in state efforts at subject formation. First, I examine how the magazine aimed to cultivate political consciousness in children through radical anti-imperialist and revolutionary discourse, shaping them into ideological agents capable of carrying forward the revolution's ideals. Second, I demonstrate how *KB*'s restrictive moral and political framework produced paradoxical effects: while promoting revolutionary consciousness, it ultimately emphasized creating docile subjects through rigid behavioral codes of conduct and unwavering submission to clerical authority. Third, I analyze how the Iran-Iraq War transformed *KB*'s gendered representations, examining the magazine's elevation of masculine martyrdom and gradual erasure of girls' active participation, which reflected broader shifts in the Islamic Republic's gender ideology. Finally, I explore how *KB*'s emphasis on humility and glorification of poverty served to encourage children's conformity to the existing social and political order while framing such submission as a revolutionary virtue. Through these interlinked analyses, I demonstrate how *KB* embodied fundamental tensions in the Islamic Republic's vision of ideal citizenship – between revolutionary agency and political obedience, gender equality and patriarchal authority, and social justice and acceptance of inequality.

### Politically revolutionary children

To shape children into revolutionary subjects, as envisioned by its post-revolutionary editorial team, *KB* first sought to transform children's mindsets and worldview through overt political socialization and indoctrination. Drawing on Ayatollah Khomeini's address to Ministry of Education officials, *KB* declared,

We must work hard for many years to be able to stand on our own feet and become independent [*mostaqel*] from both the East and the West. *We have to start with these children, change them, and make them Islamic.* Then, rest assured, no power will be able to harm us.<sup>23</sup>

The goal was to cultivate young people with “intellectual independence” (*esteqlāl-e fekri*), fortified to withstand any opposing power. In the politically charged climate of the early 1980s, political socialization and indoctrination were deemed crucial to shaping new social identities, especially for children, who were perceived as both susceptible to competing ideologies and vital to sustaining the revolutionary spirit for future generations. Such indoctrination was perceived as a legitimate and necessary measure aligned with the ideals of self-reliance and independence from global powers – core tenets of the Islamic Republic's vision.

In pursuit of its new mission, *KB* focused on cultivating children's political consciousness. A key element of this shift was the introduction of a new editorial section entitled “Conversation between You and Me” (*Goftegu-ye Man va To*), which marked a departure from the magazine's original aim of merely “entertaining” and “amusing” children. Through

<sup>21</sup> “A 60-year-old Magazine That Has Really Aged,” *Mashregh News*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/506112/>.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of *KB*'s post-war transformations, see Mehdi Faraji, “The Rise and Fall of the ‘New Man’: Citizenship and the Making of an Islamic State in Postrevolutionary Iran” (PhD diss., New York University, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Editorial Team, “From Imam's Speech,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 109, October 27, 1981, 4. Emphasis is mine.



this section, *KB* launched a series designed to explain and define critical political terms such as colonialism, imperialism, communism, Marxism, and Zionism, as well as monotheism, imamate, and *wilayat*. Unlike the political socialization and indoctrination of children in Soviet Russia, which emphasized class consciousness,<sup>24</sup> *KB* focused on a revolutionary-religious pedagogy in which Islamic concepts were integrated with modern techniques of political mobilization. The goal was to equip children with Islamic ideas against competing ideologies.

Among the terms, imperialism stood out. *KB* dedicated several editorials to clarifying the term for children, explaining the colonizing ambitions of imperialist countries in simple words: “Any country that is powerful and wants to plunder other countries is imperialist.”<sup>25</sup> The editorial named various world powers involved in imperialist ventures: “Many of the superpowers are imperialist. For example, American imperialism, British imperialism, Russian imperialism, and Chinese imperialism.”<sup>26</sup> However, American imperialism was singled out as the pinnacle of global imperialism. As time passed, the magazine’s critique narrowed its focus, moving away from imperialism in the plural form toward a singular emphasis on the US as the core embodiment of imperialism.

The magazine clarified the connection between American imperialism and colonialism for its young readers, stating: “America is a colonizing nation. It colonizes other countries. That means it steals their wealth.”<sup>27</sup> *KB* argued, “A colonial power like America deceives others by saying, ‘I want to build your country into a great civilization. I want to industrialize your nation.’ But through these deceitful promises, it seeks only to steal our wealth.”<sup>28</sup> This portrayal of the United States sharply contrasted with the pre-revolutionary image of American culture and politics. In pre-revolutionary *KB*, white European or American men were often depicted as protagonists on adventures in colonial lands. In contrast, post-revolutionary *KB* redefined Indigenous and native people as resistant fighters defying white American and European men.<sup>29</sup>

*KB* reminded children that the United States could not colonize Iran and other Muslim countries without the cooperation of regional partners, particularly Zionism. *KB* stated that Zionism, driven by expansionist ambitions, had not only “tortured and displaced the Palestinian people to establish the Israeli government,” but also aimed to “build a Zionist empire by seizing the lands of others.”<sup>30</sup> *KB* argued that, with the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the region, including the Palestinians, would be liberated from Zionism. The cover image (Figure 3) depicts barbed wires shaped like the Star of David imprisoning Al-Aqsa Mosque, but beginning to tear and unravel. Above, Khomeini’s determined face gazes into the horizon with piercing eyes, symbolizing his resolve.

American imperialism was presented as the root cause of Iran’s political and economic challenges. After the Islamic Revolution, *KB* asserted that “The United States has lost its allies in Iran and now conspires against the country.”<sup>31</sup> Iraq’s invasion of Iran was portrayed as one such conspiracy, with Saddam Hussein – described as “the puppet of American imperialism” – attacking Iran because “the superpowers, especially the United States, have realized that Iran’s Islamic Revolution is fundamentally different from previous atheistic revolutions.”<sup>32</sup> Even issues such as housing shortages, inflation, unemployment, and

<sup>24</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*.

<sup>25</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 101, September 1, 1981, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” January 16, 1981.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See Mohammadi and Ghaini, *History of Children’s Literature*, 704.

<sup>30</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” January 16, 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>32</sup> Editorial Team, “From Imam’s Speech,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 105, September 29, 1981, 4.



**Figure 3.** KB's anti-Zionist cover, July 28, 1981. Left: Cover showing barbed wire in the Star of David shape imprisoning Al-Aqsa Mosque, with Khomeini's portrait above. Right: The editorial "Conversation between You and Me" explaining Zionism to children. Source: KB Archive.

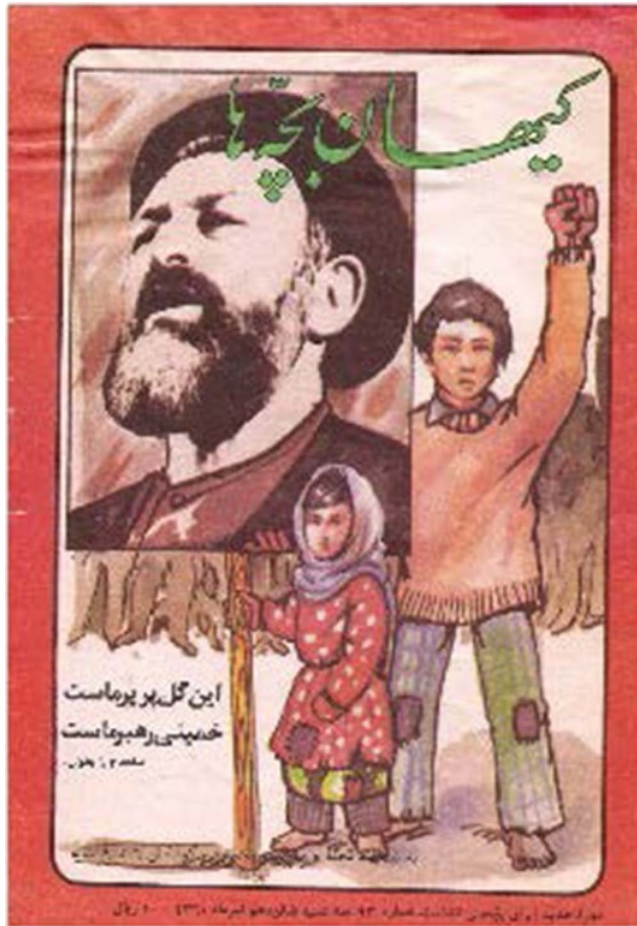
poverty in the shantytowns of Tehran and other major cities were framed as the consequences of America's long-term exploitation of Iran. As KB argued: "The US servants [*nokarān*] and counter-revolutionaries from within and the superpowers from outside are conspiring against Iran."<sup>33</sup> Children were specifically encouraged to reflect on these terms and make sense of ongoing political developments in Iran and the region.

KB's depiction of American imperialism reflects what scholars have identified as the Islamic Republic's deliberate construction of the West – particularly the United States – as the "absolute other," embodying cultural decadence and moral corruption. This process of othering not only identified external adversaries but also played a crucial role in shaping internal identity formation, teaching children to define their revolutionary identity in opposition to American cultural and political values.<sup>34</sup> By framing the U.S. as a unifying symbol of resistance, KB reinforced the cohesion of the revolutionary movement and helped consolidate the legitimacy of the newly founded regime.

Nonetheless, becoming such a revolutionary subject was portrayed in KB as an existential and embodied experience that required active engagement. Political socialization and the raising of political consciousness were considered incomplete without practicing revolutionary principles in the real world. On July 7, 1981, a week after the Mojahedin's alleged assassination of Ayatollah Beheshti, head of the judicial system and secretary-general of the Islamic Republic Party, the cover of KB (Figure 4) depicted children attending a commemoration for Beheshti to express their grief and solidarity with the Islamic Republic. The image showed a heartbroken young girl and boy holding a large poster of Beheshti, both

<sup>33</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachche-hā* 98, August 11, 1981, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, 507; Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment*, 74.



**Figure 4.** Cover depicting children at Ayatollah Beheshti's commemoration, July 7, 1981. A heartbroken young girl and boy hold Beheshti's portrait, both barefoot with torn clothes, symbolizing their connection to "the oppressed." The subtitle reads: "*in gol-e parpar-e māst, Khomeini rahbar-e māst*" (This is our flower petals falling, Khomeini is our leader). Source: KB Archive.

barefoot with torn and patched clothes, symbolizing their connection to "the oppressed" and their support for the Islamic Revolution. This portrayal emphasized that revolutionary virtue, as defined by KB, did not align with material wealth, highlighting the importance of ideological commitment over economic status.

In an unmediated relationship, KB addressed children as agents of change, soliciting them to "remember [Beheshti and his colleagues'] memory in [their] hearts and minds. [...] Identify the red line [*khatt-e sorkh*] of martyrdom and learn from and act upon it."<sup>35</sup> KB reminded its readers that "you are the children of the revolution and should learn so many things from these ongoing incidents and continue the martyrs' path. In the future, it is you who should advance the revolution."<sup>36</sup> Instead of communicating through institutions such as schools or the army, KB directly asked children to get involved in ongoing political conflicts, providing them with strict guidelines. Children aged nine to thirteen

<sup>35</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 93, July 7, 1981, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

were the audience of these intense statements addressing traumatic political events. For *KB*, however, children embodied revolutionary dreams. For the magazine, engaging children in politics at an early age was imperative to creating the next generation of the revolution.

Furthermore, for *KB*, becoming a revolutionary subject required not only engaging in revolutionary action and thought, but also cultivating revolutionary ethics. *KB* urged children to “not forget your duty” and “be ready to fight America’s conspiracies as revolutionaries,” framing “duty” as a range of ways to resist perceived threats from the United States.<sup>37</sup> For instance, in response to American economic sanctions, the magazine encouraged children to wield their “religious weapon” of fasting: “The United States decided to impose economic sanctions on Iran... The U.S. thought it could defeat the Iranian people through sanctions, but it was wrong” because “we are ready to fast but not to surrender to America.”<sup>38</sup> Here, fasting, a religious ritual, was reimagined as a powerful political tool to defy global powers and embody revolutionary ethics. Thus, for *KB*, revolutionary children required not only a “revolutionary body” (*jesm*) and “revolutionary thought” but also “revolutionary ethics” (*akhlāq-e enqelābi*).<sup>39</sup> This emphasis on ethics framed fasting as an act that reinforced the revolutionary spirit by linking religious practice to resistance against global powers. In this way, *KB* presented revolutionary ethics as an essential, sustaining force, integral to the identity of the ideal revolutionary subject.

More importantly, *KB* redefined boys’ participation in political events as a critical rite of passage into adulthood. The magazine encouraged children to attend anti-American rallies and events held in their schools and mosques. For instance, elementary school students who participated in ceremonies commemorating the anniversary of the hostage crisis were hailed as “small soldiers of Islam,” resisting US plots.<sup>40</sup> *KB* also invited children to submit stories and paintings depicting these plots, urging them to engage with the revolutionary movement. A particularly significant act for boys was writing anti-American slogans on the walls of their homes and schools, which *KB* presented as a powerful revolutionary act. This activity was reimagined as a key part of political socialization and a rite of passage. In one story, two teenagers, Hassan and Ahmad, secretly carried paint cans and brushes to write their first anti-American slogans in the months leading up to the revolution (Figure 5). The act felt momentous to them. “When I was holding the brush and writing the slogan,” Hassan described, “it was as if I were holding a torch.” After writing some revolutionary slogans on the wall, “I felt I grew up a lot and was doing a significant thing.”<sup>41</sup> Rather than defining adulthood through traditional milestones such as puberty, first romantic relationships, or financial independence, *KB* instead emphasized political activism, particularly the writing of slogans, as the pivotal moment of boys’ transformation into adults – from passive to active and rebellious subjects.

### Docile revolutionary children

Despite promoting a revolutionary spirit and political rebellion, *KB* also emphasized the importance of obedience to political leaders. It framed political socialization without Islamic guidance as dangerous, specifically positioning obedience to Khomeini’s leadership as the guiding light of salvation. *KB* presented Khomeini as a political leader and “Imam,” a spiritual guide leading the nation. “Imam means guide, means leader,” *KB* explained.

<sup>37</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 110, November 3, 1981, 3.

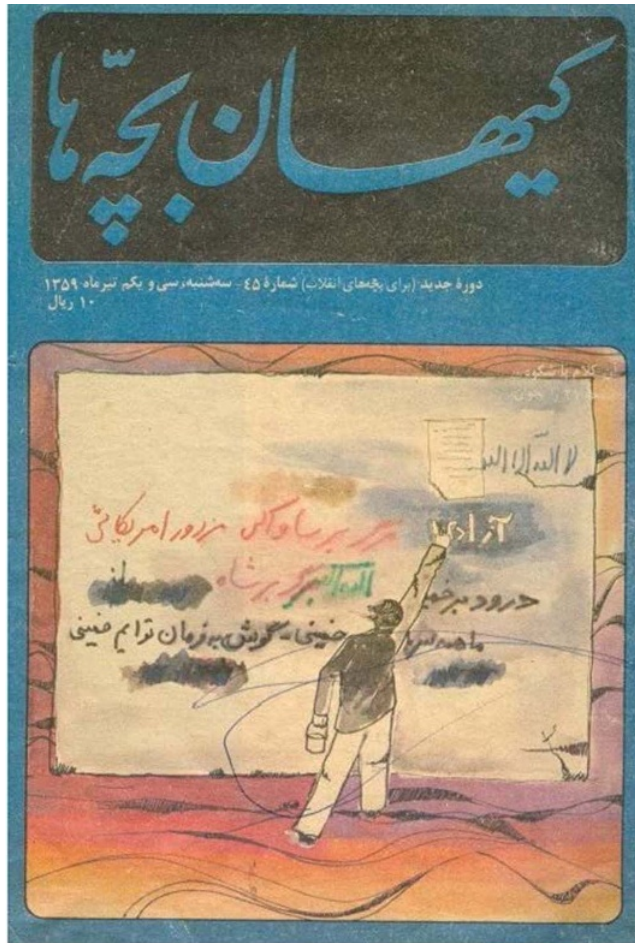
<sup>38</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 45, July 22, 1980, 4. The United States first imposed sanctions on Iran on November 14, 1979, just ten days after a group of Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Tehran and took hostages. These sanctions, enacted through Executive Order 12170 by President Jimmy Carter, included freezing \$8.1 billion in Iranian assets.

<sup>39</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 63, October 26, 1980, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Sharareh Vazifehshenas, “Report: Small Soldiers of Islam,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 112, November 17, 1981, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Editorial Team, “That Glorious Word,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 45, July 22, 1980, 22.





**Figure 5.** Cover showing political activism as a rite of passage, July 22, 1980. Hassan writes anti-American slogans, including “Death to the American mercenary,” “Freedom,” and “We are all your soldiers, Khomeini, we follow your commands, Khomeini.” Source: KB Archive.

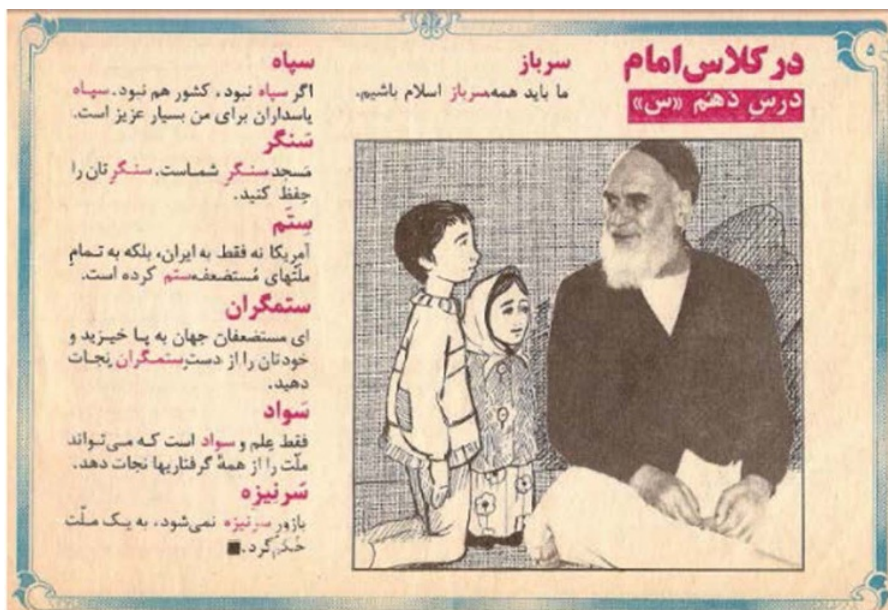
A guide is someone who shows the path, moving ahead because he knows the way, and others follow him. Just as the Muslim nation of Iran follows its Imam, Imam Khomeini, because he knows Islam best and can guide the people.<sup>42</sup>

To familiarize children with Khomeini’s political leadership, *KB* introduced a new section entitled “From Imam’s Speech,” which highlighted his weekly addresses. This section covered Khomeini’s meetings with foreign ambassadors, Islamic religious authorities, cabinet members, officials, and the general public. It also featured Khomeini’s statements on critical political events in Iran, such as the Mojahedin conflict, the crackdown on the Tudeh Party and the Marxist-Leninist Fada’iyan, the Kurdistan uprising, and the ongoing hostage crisis.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 95, July 21, 1980, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Editorial Team, “From Imam’s Speech,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 62, November 18, 1980, 10. The Tudeh Party, Fada’iyan, and Mojahedin were founded in 1941, 1963, and 1965 respectively. See Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels With A*





**Figure 6.** “In Imam’s Class” page from *Shāparak* (Butterfly) special issue, January 19, 1982. Khomeini is portrayed as a teacher-grandfather, teaching revolutionary vocabulary through basic literacy lessons to children ages six–nine. Source: KB Archive.

At the same time, Khomeini was depicted as a down-to-earth teacher guiding students in the early stages of reading and writing. *KB*’s special issues for children aged six to nine, *Shāparak* (Butterfly), assigned “In Imam’s Class” (*dar kelās-e emam*) to help first graders learn new letters and vocabulary. As Figure 6 shows, the setting was not a classroom with desks and blackboards, and students did not wear school uniforms. Khomeini, too, was portrayed as a teacher-grandfather, sitting next to his young students, smiling, and wearing casual attire. This was far from his serious image as “the great leader of the revolution,” usually depicted in the media.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, in Imam’s class, whether in pajamas or uniforms, it was “Imam’s words” that were at stake. Children learned the alphabet to understand “Imam’s words” – another opportunity for *KB* to infuse religious and politico-ideological concepts into elementary education. For one thing, Lesson Ten (Figure 6), teaching the letter “S” (س), introduced the following vocabularies selected from Khomeini’s speeches: Revolutionary Guard (*sepāh*), soldier (*sarbāz*), trench (*sangar*), oppression (*setam*), oppressors (*setamgarān*), bayonet (*sarneyzeh*), and literacy (*savād*). These are just a few examples of the many vocabulary lessons published in *KB* every week.<sup>45</sup>

Khomeini was also portrayed as a grandfather, symbolizing wisdom and kindness. He was able to gather family members around himself, uniting and guiding them at times of hardship, be it grandchildren’s homework or the Iran-Iraq War. Comparing Iran to a family

*Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Ali Rahnama, *Call to Arms: Iran’s Marxist Revolutionaries: Formation and Evolution of the Fada’is, 1964–1976* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Simplicity (*sade-zisti*) was a defining characteristic in portrayals of Khomeini’s personality, lifestyle, and mystic aura in children’s media. He was often depicted in casual attire, sitting with children, teaching them the alphabet, playing, washing dishes in the kitchen, walking with them in the yard, performing daily prayers, and even meeting with officials of the Islamic Republic.

<sup>45</sup> Editorial Team, “In Imam’s Class,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 121, January 19, 1982, 1.

and describing Khomeini as the main pillar of this family, *KB* interpreted Khomeini's domestic and foreign policy decisions as the best judgement of a compassionate grandfather who wanted the best for his loved ones and the family. In doing so, *KB* not only prioritized the non-biological family of the Islamic Revolution over the biological family, but also discredited the legitimacy of the ties of biological family bonds. *KB* implicitly undermined the authority of actual grandfathers by depicting Khomeini as the trustworthy grandfather to obey. At the same time, blurring the borders between classroom and living room, student and kin, teacher and grandfather, *KB* promoted a notion of national kinship hinging upon a patriarchal and gerontocracy hierarchy.

The call for obedience extended beyond Khomeini, reaching ruling clerics, Friday imams, mosque imams, and any clergy aligned with the Islamic Republic. *KB* argued that without clerical guidance, children's social and political activism could be dangerous. To counter this, the magazine encouraged children to attend pro-government rallies, Muharram commemorations, and sermons in mosques – not only to support “true Muslim communities” but also to internalize the state's ideological principles. Being connected with “true” Muslim communities and guides, *KB* suggested, would help children identify “who is in the false corps [*sepāh-e bātel*] and who is in the right corps [*sepah-e haqq*].”<sup>46</sup> By engaging in these activities, children would learn to “identify real Muslims from traitors”<sup>47</sup> and, more importantly, recognize “who is hypocrite [*monāfeq*] and who is warrior [*mojāhed*].”<sup>48</sup> These messages reflected the tensions escalating in the early 1980s between the Islamic Republic and rival groups such as the Mojahedin, whose political rallies, radical ideas, and propaganda targeted youth and schoolchildren, raising significant concerns for *KB*. In response, *KB* promoted obedience to ruling clerics as the solution, extending the Shi'i practice of *taqleed* (emulation of religious authorities) – traditionally limited to religious law – into the political sphere. By urging children to look to pro-government clerics as models for political behavior, *KB* transformed *taqleed* into a tool for fostering both revolutionary consciousness and political obedience. This reinterpretation exemplifies how the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology repurposed traditional Shi'i concepts for modern political goals, extending these efforts to children's political education.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, despite successive government changes between 1979–1989, *KB* maintained its political and ideological loyalty to the ruling clergy. This consistency stemmed from *KB*'s institutional position: its editorial team was appointed by the head of the Keyhan firm, who was appointed directly by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini – creating a direct line of ideological authority that bypassed governmental changes. This institutional arrangement ensured that *KB* consistently represented the political orientation of what became known as the “Imam's Line” (*khat-e Imām*) and its supporters, the Hezbollah vigilantes, regardless of who held the presidency or prime ministership. For instance, during the final months of Abolhasan Bani-Sadr's presidency (February 1980 to June 1981), when tensions between Bani-Sadr and the *khat-e Imām* forces escalated into violent street clashes and confrontations in universities, *KB* reflected this conflict in its content. The magazine published an editorial subtitled “Party, Only Party of God” (*hezb faqat hezbollah*), implicitly criticizing Bani-Sadr and his supporters. The editorial framed the Hezbollah vigilantes as righteous defenders of the revolution, using Quranic verses to legitimize their role in suppressing political dissent.<sup>50</sup> Thus, rather than reflecting partisan governmental changes,

<sup>46</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 62, November 18, 1980, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 98, August 11, 1981, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 62, November 18, 1980, 20.

<sup>49</sup> On how revolutionary ideology reframed religious concepts, see Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*.

<sup>50</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me: Party, Only Party of God Hezb” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 82, April 21, 1981, 3.

KB functioned as a state cultural institution steadfast in its loyalty to the Islamic Republic's overarching ideology and encouraging its young readers to do the same.

Moreover, the idea of obedience transcended religious and political spheres, permeating children's daily lives through strict codes of conduct and behavioral expectations. KB's political messaging intruded into everyday interactions, stigmatizing children for minor infractions. Those displaying ordinary childhood behaviors were excluded from the category of "good" and labeled as careless or inconsiderate. KB cautioned, "If you do not complete your homework on time, you will become lazy and neglectful,"<sup>51</sup> and criticized children for playing in their school uniforms, claiming that those who fell, tore, or dirtied their clothes were inconsiderate and burdensome to their parents. "Such children," KB argued, "exhibited extravagance (*esrāf*) and a disregard for Islamic ethics, distancing themselves from Islam."<sup>52</sup> The magazine even went as far as to label some children as traitors and cheaters, enforcing a rigid standard of morality:

What's your most important job? It's studying! Back in the days of *tāghut* [the time of the Pahlavi era], not studying was bad. But now, during the Islamic Republic, studying is even more important. If you don't study, it's not just wrong – it's like committing a sin. By not studying, you'd be letting down your parents and teachers, and most importantly, you'd be betraying the Islamic Republic and hurting it.<sup>53</sup>

KB was filled with dos and do nots, setting expectations for what "good" children should do, almost like a weekly list of commandments. These rules covered every part of life, giving orders such as: "Obey your teachers," "listen to the Imam," "pay attention to the clerics in the mosques," "respect your parents," "be kind to the elderly," "keep your clothes clean," "keep your books tidy," "take care of your stationery," "don't doodle on the wall," and "don't damage your school desk."<sup>54</sup> The rules seemed endless. Even doing homework was defined as a "revolutionary duty" (*vazifeh-ye enqelābi*). KB reminded kids:

You are the guardians of Islam, and today, it's your duty to do your homework and study hard. Just as your brothers in the Revolutionary Guards, the army, and the Basijis are fighting on the front lines, you must work hard at school. This is your revolutionary duty.<sup>55</sup>

Ironically, KB framed obedience as a revolutionary act, aiming to mold children into docile revolutionaries. This approach created a unique tension, as the magazine positioned itself both as an extension of school and as a substitute for the roles of teachers and parents. On one hand, KB aimed to fill the gaps left by formal education; on the other, it undermined the authority of teachers and parents by directly instructing children on how to behave – not only in political matters, but in everyday life. While KB encouraged children to participate actively in politics and nation-building, it did so within strict social, political, and moral limits, allowing little room for independent thought or action. This paradoxical approach created a carefully controlled form of agency, where political engagement was encouraged but narrowly defined by the Islamic Republic. Social activism was idealized but constrained, limited to a rigid set of codes and behavioral expectations that defined "appropriate" revolutionary children.

<sup>51</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 122, January 26, 1982, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," October 26, 1980, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 116, December 15, 1981, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 54, September 23, 1980, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Editorial Team, "Conversation between You and Me," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 178, December 15, 1982, 3.

The creation of “appropriate” revolutionary children – effectively, docile revolutionary children – was not confined to *KB*, however, as this was part of a broader political socialization effort pursued by the school system. In her analysis of 1980s Iranian school textbooks, Golnar Mehran highlights that a primary goal of this socialization process was to shape a model citizen who was deeply religious, politically aware and engaged, prepared for self-sacrifice in the name of Islam and the revolution, and, most importantly, respectful and obedient to the country’s leaders.<sup>56</sup>

### Gender, war, and revolutionary identity

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) marked a pivotal moment of transformation in *KB*’s representation of gender and citizenship. This devastating conflict, which claimed over 200,000 Iranian lives,<sup>57</sup> provided the magazine with powerful narratives to construct the idealized masculine and feminine subjects, emphasizing male martyrdom while erasing female political agency. In response, *KB* shifted its focus to glorify masculine sacrifice and duty, while limiting female presence to passive or domestic roles. Through a detailed analysis of *KB*’s wartime content, this section explores how the magazine’s gender ideology evolved, reflecting the Islamic Republic’s broader vision of its ideal revolutionary citizens.

### War makes “men”

During wartime, *KB* played a significant role in popularizing the masculine ideals of self-sacrifice among children. “We paid special attention to the war,” said Mohammad Hossein Salavatian, the writer and editor-in-chief of *KB*, “and always incorporated a poem, a story, an illustration, or something about the war and self-sacrifice in each issue.”<sup>58</sup> War stories were told and retold through the prescribed narratives of the state-promoted ethos and the male characters that embodied it. Through state-sanctioned narratives, *KB* repeatedly celebrated the “sacred defense” (*defa‘-e moqaddas*) – a term coined by the Iranian government to describe the eight-year war with Iraq. This term framed the conflict as both a defensive struggle against an imposed war and a religious duty, honoring the sacrifices and martyrdom of young boys.<sup>59</sup> While traditional notions of masculinity often glorify large, strong, and muscular physiques, *KB* presented an alternative ideal: soldiers who appeared ordinary, even meager or physically weak. These soldiers rejected the typical standards of masculine strength, embodying courage and fearlessness through high morale rather than physical prowess. This portrayal emphasized that it was the spiritual strength inspired by the “sacred defense,” not the materiality of their bodies, that made these men heroic.

Framing the defense of Islam and the Islamic Republic as a sacred duty, *KB* transformed the front lines into “spiritual places” (*makān-e ma‘navi*) where men could embody their highest calling: martyrdom. Death in battle was depicted as the ultimate goal and path to salvation. “In the war,” *KB* asserted, “the [Iranian] soldiers of Islam are victorious if they kill the enemies; and even if they are martyred, they have achieved their dream. Either

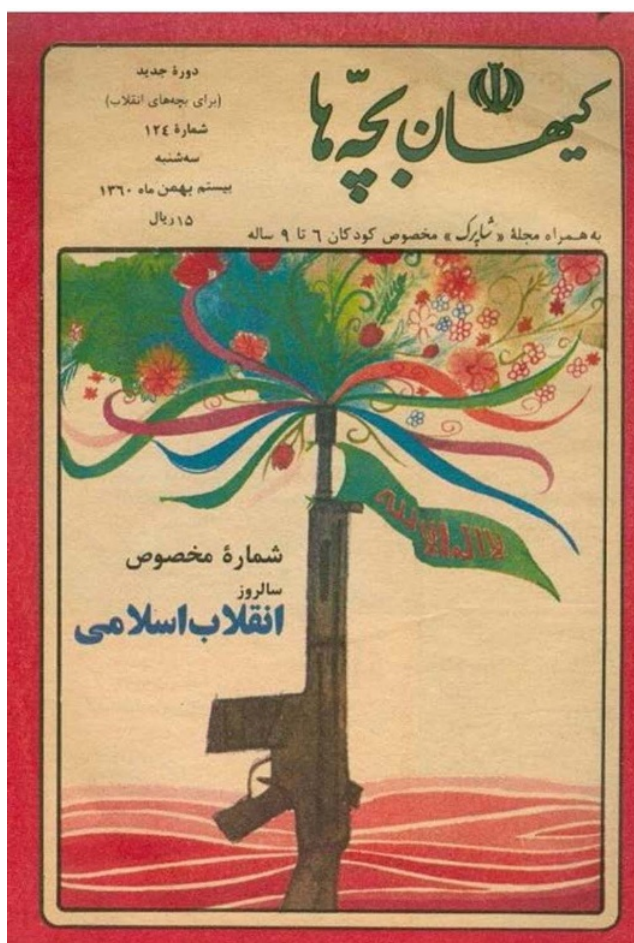
<sup>56</sup> Mehran, “Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

<sup>57</sup> Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 250; Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 175.

<sup>58</sup> Mohammad Hossein Salavatian, “Interview with IRIB,” *IRIB News*, January 3, 2019, <http://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2319326>.

<sup>59</sup> The commemoration of the “sacred defense” led to the emergence of a state-sponsored genre of the same name in cinema, theater, and literature. For more discussion on the “sacred defense theater” and a counter-conduct theatricality, see Marjan Moosavi, “Desacralizing Whispers: Counter-Conduct in the Iranian War Theatre,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2018): 235–48. For more on “sacred defense cinema,” see Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema. Volume 4, The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).





**Figure 7.** Cover commemorating the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, February 9, 1982. Colorful flowers, blossoms, and ribbons grow from a German G3 rifle barrel, symbolizing the transformation of military implements through “sacred defense.” Source: KB Archive.

way, they win.”<sup>60</sup> On *KB*’s cover (Figure 7), the deadly German G3 rifle, standard in the Iranian army during the war, was shown sprouting colorful flowers, blossoms, and ribbons – symbols of life, hope, and happiness – but only when wielded by the “army of Islam,” representing the Islamic Republic. This imagery underscored *KB*’s message: the war was not merely a battle, it was an opportunity that turned instruments of death into symbols of spiritual triumph.

This masculine narrative of war and the battlefield drew heavily on religious interpretations and early Islamic events, particularly the tragedy of Karbala in 680 CE, when Yazid’s soldiers, under the second Umayyad caliph, killed Hossein – the Prophet Mohammad’s grandson and the third Shi’i Imam – alongside his companions. *KB* frequently depicted images of doves, red tulips, and male hands symbolizing the severed hand of Abalfazl Al-Abbas, Hossein’s half-brother, evoking tragic scenes from Karbala. Through these images, *KB* imbued the Iran-Iraq War with themes of pain, suffering, and death as noble sacrifices, overlooking the physical and psychological toll on those fighting. The politicized narratives

<sup>60</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachche-hā* 69, January 6, 1981, 4.



of Karbala, developed in the 1970s as a symbol of resistance against the Pahlavi regime, cast Hossein as the “Prince of Martyrs” (*sālār-e shahidān*).<sup>61</sup> This symbolism extended to the Iran-Iraq War, with its martyrs heralded as the new heroes of Iran, embodying ideals of valor and sacrifice in the Islamic Republic. *KB*’s depiction of martyrs reflected the Islamic Republic’s broader efforts to fuse Shi’i martyrdom narratives with modern revolutionary politics.<sup>62</sup> Like much of the state-controlled media, the magazine reimagined traditional religious stories of Karbala, presenting them as contemporary role models tailored for children.

Narratives and images of martyrdom prominently featured a unified representation of an idealized figure known as the Basiji, referring to members of the Basij Resistance Force. Established in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Basij (literally meaning “mobilization”) operates as a volunteer paramilitary organization under the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. From the outset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, *KB* portrayed the Basiji as an adult male embodying moral virtues such as piety, bravery, sincerity, and a quest for martyrdom. This characterization aimed to distinguish these “ideal” men from “ordinary” citizens preoccupied with the material aspects of urban life.

However, by 1984, *KB*’s portrayal of the Basiji underwent a significant shift. The adult male Basijis depicted in stories, reports, and images were increasingly replaced by teenage boys known as “Basiji students” (*dāneshāmuz-e basiji*), many of whom were below conscription age, including boys as young as thirteen. Their heroism and yearning for martyrdom became central to *KB*’s narratives, reflecting the regime’s struggles to recruit volunteer fighters during this challenging period. Following the liberation of Khorramshahr on May 24, 1982, and subsequent setbacks on the battlefield, the rationality of continuing the war was hotly debated within both the regime and society.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the armed forces faced growing difficulties attracting new recruits and rebuilding decimated divisions.<sup>64</sup> The war of attrition that began in 1984 would continue for another four years, with Iraq relying heavily on weapons and financial support from Arab and Western allies, while Iran maximized nationalist sentiments, revolutionary fervor, and the Shiite cult of martyrdom to counteract its complete isolation.<sup>65</sup>

During this period, *KB* began to heavily invest in portraying these teenage boys as the new heroes of the children, emphasizing their thin, fragile bodies. For *KB*, moral values were more significant than physical strength, enabling children to embody the ideals of adulthood. The narratives lionized child soldiers as “awakened Basiji students” and patriots, presenting them as mature enough to surpass childhood and join the “extraordinary” adults on the front lines. The concepts of “martyrdom-seeking” (*shahādāt talabi*) and self-sacrifice (*azkhodgozash tegi*) were emphasized as key characteristics of “good” boys. After the war, officials proudly announced that more than 550,000 “Basiji students” had served on the front during the eight-year conflict with Iraq, with 36,000 reported killed.<sup>66</sup> Frequent reports highlighted the experiences of boys as young as thirteen who volunteered as fighters (Figure 8), reiterating the hegemonic narrative of the bravery and sincerity of the Basijis

<sup>61</sup> Kamran Scot Aghaie explores the significant transformation of Iranian Shi’i rituals and symbols of Moharram, which center on the 7th-century Battle of Karbala, from an apolitical ritual in the 19th and early 20th centuries to a politicized one in the pre- and post-revolutionary decades of the 1970s and 1980s. See Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi’i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> See Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006); Christiane Gruber, “The Message on the Wall: Mural Arts in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *Persica* 22 (2008): 15–46.

<sup>63</sup> Farideh Farhi, “The Antinomies of Iran’s War Generation,” in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 106.

<sup>64</sup> Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2015), 377.

<sup>65</sup> Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 344.

<sup>66</sup> “36,000 Students Martyrs of the Holy Defense,” *Mehr News Agency*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4787452/>.



**Figure 8.** Representation of Basiji students, November 27, 1984. Left: Cover shows Basiji students in military parade carrying guns and red flags with Karbala-signifying headbands. Right: Report featuring teenage Basiji fighters smiling on the front line. Source: KB Archive.

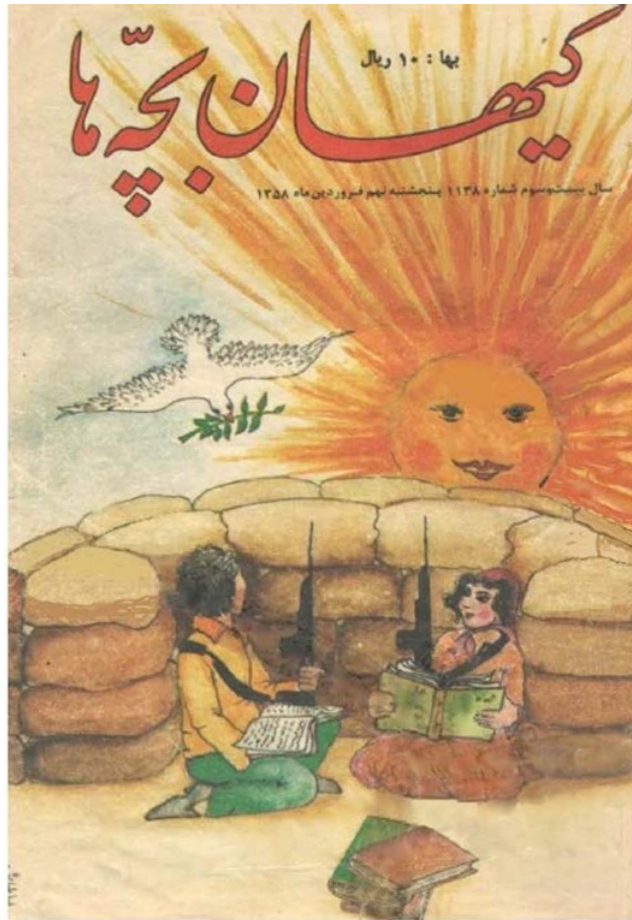
and the spiritual atmosphere of the front lines. These accounts often included mystical elements, emphasizing how the war transformed the character of these young boys.<sup>67</sup>

### War made girls absent

During the immediate post-revolutionary period (1979–1981), KB embraced a distinctive approach to gender representation, depicting girls and boys as equal partners in revolutionary efforts. This reflected the revolutionary fervor of 1979, a time when calls for freedom and equality shaped public discourse. The magazine's first revolutionary cover (Figure 2) depicted a young girl participating in anti-Pahlavi street protests while holding a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini. Shortly after, another cover (Figure 9) illustrated a boy and girl fighting side by side in street battles. Seated together in a street trench, they appeared both as committed students and revolutionaries, clutching textbooks in one hand and guns in the other. In the same issue, an illustration featured five teenage girls and boys gathered to honor two friends killed in the protests, with their dialogue emphasizing both men's and women's indispensable contributions to the revolutionary cause.<sup>68</sup> Several other covers during this period depicted girls actively engaged in political events, some even holding guns, while others showed girls participating in social activities without the Islamic hijab. One striking

<sup>67</sup> Ahmad Gholami, "Report: Spring of Victory," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 337, May 13, 1986, 42–45; Mohammadreza Sarshar, "Report: A Trip to the Southern Fronts," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 338, May 20, 1986, 33–35; Mohammadreza Sarshar, "Report: A Trip to the Southern Fronts," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 341, June 10, 1986, 10–11; Mohammadreza Sarshar, "Report: A Trip to the Southern Fronts," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 343, June 24, 1986, 12–13.

<sup>68</sup> "Independence, Freedom, and Islamic Republic," *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 1138, November 3, 1981, 2–6.



**Figure 9.** Cover depicting revolutionary gender equality, March 29, 1979. A girl and boy fight side by side in street battles against the Pahlavi regime, shown as committed students with textbooks and guns, under a hopeful sun and peace-bearing dove. Source: KB Archive.

example was *KB*'s organization of a girls' cycling race, and the magazine proudly showcasing photos of competitors cycling without hijab.<sup>69</sup>

However, two pivotal developments transformed *KB*'s gender politics. Politically, the newly established regime began adopting repressive policies toward women. While the state's efforts to curtail women's freedoms – such as the introduction of mandatory hijab – faced significant protests and civil resistance, these measures were implemented incrementally, culminating in the mandatory hijab law of 1983.<sup>70</sup> Institutionally, the replacement of *KB*'s veteran staff with a young, inexperienced but revolutionary and pro-Khomeini editorial team in the summer of 1979 marked a turning point.<sup>71</sup> It took almost a year for this new team to be able to fully reframe *KB* to reflect the Islamic Republic's broader policies, including its conservative gender ideology. This transformation led to the gradual erasure

<sup>69</sup> "Cycling Race: *Keyhān-e Bachchēh-hā* Cup," *Keyhān-e Bachchēh-hā* 85, May 12, 1981, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 342.

<sup>71</sup> On May 14, 1979, *Keyhan*'s Islamic Association members took over the newspaper. See Hossein Shahidi, *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession*, 1st ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 38.

of women's active social participation from *KB*'s pages and a shift toward conventional representations of gender roles.

The Iran-Iraq War significantly bolstered and accelerated this shift in *KB*'s gender representation. During the war, boys took center stage as brave defenders of the nation, while girls were almost entirely erased, relegated to domestic roles that reinforced traditional gender divides. In *KB*'s war stories, boys appeared as heroic warriors on the front lines, whereas girls were depicted primarily in household settings, if at all. This narrow depiction overlooked the significant contributions of thousands of Iranian women who actually participated in the war – fighting alongside men, gathering intelligence, caring for the wounded, burying the dead, and providing vital logistical support on the home front.<sup>72</sup> Yet, as discussed in the previous section, *KB*'s war stories were almost exclusively male-centric; women were entirely absent from depictions of battle, training, reporting, and even supportive tasks such as preparing uniforms, food, and supplies for soldiers. The erasure was so pervasive that the term “children” in *KB* often referred exclusively to boys – making *Boys' Universe* seem a more fitting title than *Children's Universe*.

Furthermore, the marginalization of girls in *KB* persisted well into the post-war period, when their representation became even more restricted. Although girls eventually reappeared in the magazine, they were no longer shown in roles of political activism or social engagement. Instead, their presence was limited to stereotypical portrayals rooted in conventional gender roles. Boys continued to be depicted as active participants in social and political activities, while girls were shown primarily managing domestic tasks. Even in images of girls attending government rallies and events, they appeared as passive participants, positioned behind boys rather than engaging on equal terms. This shift highlighted a clear departure from the earlier portrayal of gender equality, reinforcing a more constrained view of girls' roles in public life.

The passive portrayal of girls in *KB* reflected the broader gendered discourse of the time, in which women's roles in public life were reduced to supporters or spectators. During the eight-year war with Iraq, Iranian print media mentioned the word *zan* (woman) only ninety-three times out of more than 20,187 articles on the conflict – a mere 0.004 percent. In this context, media narratives rigidly defined gender roles, leaving little space to acknowledge women's substantial contributions to the war effort.<sup>73</sup> Scholars have noted similar patterns in Iranian school textbooks, which depicted boys as active participants in society while confining girls to domestic or secondary roles. Shervin Malekzadeh observes that when girls' political activities were depicted in schoolbooks, they were shown as passive followers, with boys portrayed as active leaders.<sup>74</sup> This gendered representation was pervasive in state-sponsored media, *KB*, and educational materials, reinforcing deeply entrenched notions of the social division of labor between men and women, further marginalizing girls in social and political spheres.

### **Socially humble yet conformist**

*KB*'s stories promoted a vision of childhood centered on moral and social commitment to humility, positioning this trait as a defining characteristic absent in prerevolutionary and Western children. The magazine presented this transformation as achievable through suffering, hardship, and diligent work, portraying these experiences as essential to becoming

<sup>72</sup> Despite their significant contributions, women are largely absent from studies on the war. Farzaneh, however, shows in detail women's participation on the battlefield, in the household, and everywhere in between. See Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh, *Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2021).

<sup>73</sup> Farzaneh, *Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War*, 371.

<sup>74</sup> Shervin Malekzadeh, “Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood: Changing Conceptions of the Iranian Child in Postrevolutionary Iranian Textbooks (1979–2008),” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, & the Middle East* 32, no. 2 (2012): 345.



an “authentic” revolutionary child. Such struggles were depicted not only as valuable but as deeply meaningful, contrasting the purposeful lives of the poor and oppressed, devoted to social struggle, with the aimless, empty existence of the wealthy. This emphasis on humility, hard work, and endurance was closely tied to the magazine’s revolutionary ideals, framing these qualities as essential to shaping future generations for political and social activism.

KB drew heavily on early Islamic history, filling its stories with romanticized narratives of pain and suffering equated with spiritual truth. The struggles of the Prophet Mohammad in spreading Islam were often highlighted to justify the suffering that “true” Muslims were expected to endure.<sup>75</sup> The magazine exalted Khadijah, who “was once a rich woman and gave away her wealth in the path of Islam” and married the impoverished Mohammad “for the sake of Islam.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the humble lifestyle of Abu Dhar al-Ghifari, a close companion of the Prophet, was upheld as an example of sacrificing material wealth for a higher truth. The lives of Ali, Fatimah, Zaynab, and other Shi’i Imams were portrayed as symbols of enduring hardship in service to Islam.<sup>77</sup> Imam Hossein’s martyrdom at Karbala became the ultimate symbol of pain and endurance, with KB elevating his sacrifice as the peak of spiritual purity. By glorifying Karbala’s tragedy in 680 CE, the magazine distinguished between meaningful and meaningless lives. By repeatedly recounting the hardships of these Islamic figures and mythic-historical heroes, KB linked their struggles with the foundation of the Islamic Republic, framing current economic hardships as a continuation of this long historical journey toward realizing Islam’s truth.

Emphasizing humility as a virtue, KB portrayed poverty and child labor as honorable aspects of a child’s life in revolutionary Iran. A cover image (Figure 10) featured a teenage boy holding a wrench in one hand and schoolbooks in the other, with steel chains and an oil rig in the background, symbolizing a generation of Iranian children who saw no conflict between working and attending school. Instead of condemning child labor, KB framed it as a noble duty that served the child, the revolution, and the nation. “Do not think that working is bad,”<sup>78</sup> KB asserted. “Many children work in factories, carpet-weaving workshops, on farms, and as peddlers to support their families. Some are even fighting on the Iran-Iraq front... They all serve their country.”<sup>79</sup> For KB, labor was both a necessity and a contribution, reinforcing the message that “all children must sacrifice and work hard to build our country.”<sup>80</sup> Economic hardship and social inequalities were recast as vital experiences, essential to molding children into mature, responsible citizens.

KB’s child protagonists often faced extreme hardship, yet were depicted as proud and inwardly content. For instance, Mohammad Ali, a homeless teenager, lived in a public park (Pār-k-e Shahr) in Tehran with his single father and three younger siblings, working as a peddler in the mornings and selling newspapers in the afternoons. He was not alone; his friends, also street peddlers, believed their struggles gave them a deeper understanding of life.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Dani, a nine-year-old boy, lived with his father in a small, dilapidated cabin next to an auto repair shop. He assisted his father during his free time and expressed contentment with their simple lifestyle, saying, “Our house is old, but I live a happy life here.”<sup>82</sup> Goli, a ten-year-old girl, had to drop out of school to support her family. In addition to managing household chores and caring for her younger siblings, she sewed to help her mother, who worked as a poorly paid laundry worker in a hospital. Despite her challenges, Goli concluded her story with a profound reflection: “When I look back, I realize

<sup>75</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 86, May 19, 1981, 3.

<sup>76</sup> “Anniversary of the Death of Khadijah,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 45, July 22, 1980, 15.

<sup>77</sup> “Sister as a Heroine,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 86, May 19, 1981, 12.

<sup>78</sup> “Response to Letters,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 111, November 10, 1981, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 106, October 6, 1981, 3.

<sup>80</sup> “A Letter from a Carpet Weaver,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 112, November 17, 1981, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Mohammad Tehrani, “From the South Side,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 163, November 16, 1982, 10–14.

<sup>82</sup> Roald Dahl, “The Hero of the World,” trans. Mehri Soheyl, *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 35, May 8, 1980, 8.





**Figure 10.** Cover addressing child labor, October 6, 1981. A teenage boy holds a wrench and schoolbooks against an industrial backdrop, representing KB's validation of child labor as a revolutionary duty. Source: KB Archive.

that one can endure hardships better when they understand the value of their suffering.”<sup>83</sup> Through these narratives, KB emphasized resilience and inner strength, portraying children who, despite their difficult circumstances, found pride and fulfillment in their lives.

The inner happiness of laboring children was closely tied to their hardworking fathers, who were portrayed as role models and heroes. Despite facing poverty and struggling to make ends meet, their integrity and moral strength earned these fathers the admiration of their children. As Bijan, a teenage character living in extreme hardship, reflected, “My father was a poor man, but he had a big heart and wasn’t willing to do anything bad to earn money.”<sup>84</sup> These men, despite their humble circumstances, found meaning and pride in their lives, bolstered by the ideals of the new regime. Khomeini’s speeches, frequently published in KB, celebrated their way of life, as he declared: “I consider you slum dwellers [*gwodneshin-hā*] superior to those palace dwellers. They do not even deserve to be compared

<sup>83</sup> Susan Taghdis, “The Story of Goli’s Sorrows,” trans. Mehri Soheyl, *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 115, December 8, 1981, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Daryush Norouzi, “More Important than Money,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 118, December 29, 1981, 7.

to you.”<sup>85</sup> Such statements reinforced *KB*’s message that living humbly and enduring hardship were the new values in revolutionary Iran, promoting a sense of dignity and purpose among both fathers and their children.

Furthermore, *KB* connected Iranians’ local economic hardships to the broader anti-imperialist struggles of the Global South, thereby adding political significance to their humble lives. The magazine emphasized that “we are not alone” in this fight against oppression.<sup>86</sup> Just as the oppressed in Iran battled the direct and indirect schemes of the United States and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union, similar struggles were occurring in other countries. *KB* highlighted the plight of the Muslims of Lebanon, displaced Palestinian Muslims, the Afghan Mujahidin, the Muslim people of Polisario, and the people of Vietnam, all standing against oppression.<sup>87</sup> For *KB*, this trans-sectarian solidarity among the down-trodden was integral to the shared experiences of revolutionaries. Children in Iran, like their counterparts in the Global South, endured poverty as a means of becoming better versions of themselves – revolutionary children.

## Conclusion

The transformation of *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* from an entertainment magazine to a tool of ideological indoctrination reveals a broader shift in children’s socialization in post-revolutionary Iran. Through its pages, we see how the state sought to create what I have term “docile revolutionary children” –subjects who were simultaneously independent-minded yet obedient, militant yet disciplined, politically conscious yet ideologically constrained. This paradox permeates the magazine’s content, illuminating the complexities of state-led subject formation.

The magazine’s trajectory highlights several patterns in this process. First, while *KB* aimed to cultivate political consciousness and revolutionary spirit, it simultaneously imposed rigid behavioral and ideological boundaries that ultimately undermined its own revolutionary aspirations. Second, the Iran-Iraq War fundamentally shifted the magazine’s gender representations, effectively erasing girls from the public sphere while elevating male martyrdom and sacrifice to the highest form of citizenship. Third, the magazine’s emphasis on humility and suffering, intended to create revolutionary consciousness, instead reinforced conformity to existing social and political hierarchies.

These patterns underscore how cultural institutions, such as *KB*, serve as vehicles for state projects of citizen-making, grappling with the inherent contradictions between agency and obedience, revolutionary consciousness and political compliance, and gender equality and patriarchal norms. The magazine’s transformation during the critical years of 1979–1989, a period marked by the Islamic Republic’s consolidation of power, reveals both the regime’s aspirations for its ideal citizenry and the tensions embedded in constructing revolutionary subjects under clerical authority. Such dynamics remain influential in shaping Iranian political culture and citizen-state relations today.

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<sup>85</sup> Editorial Team, “From Imam’s Speech,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 82, April 21, 1981, 4.

<sup>86</sup> Editorial Team, “Conversation between You and Me,” *Keyhān-e Bachcheh-hā* 97, August 4, 1981, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

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