Abstract:

In this paper I am discussing the growing political consciousness of the Iranian youth population. Today, there are about 80 million people living in Iran and 60% of these people are under the age of 30, making Iran have a substantially significant youth population. The current Iranian youth generation is a result of the 1980s spike in religiously motivated procreation mandated by the Iranian theocratic regime after the 1979 Revolution. I am arguing that the current youth generation in Iran has been developing a political consciousness that wants more economic, political and social freedoms under a theocratic regime. This generation is not rejecting but rather arguing for the natural progression of Islam that incorporates certain inherent freedoms. This youth population over the course of several decades has transgressed economic and class differences in order to become a highly politicized population. The effects of this politicization is that the youth generation now is assuming their political position within the domestic and international political arena by educating themselves in order to demand their inherent freedoms. Iran’s youth population does not want a revolution nor in any means has it hit the peak of its political consciousness; rather this specific population has tapped into the mechanisms in place to foster political consciousness in order to garner more freedoms.
The Political Consciousness of the Iranian Youth Generation

“The youth play a vital role in transforming the society into a dynamic nation…” – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader, 2000 (Basmanji, 1.)

“On a daily basis, our youth are pushing the envelope in their quest for self-empowerment…Indeed, no generation in our history has been as politically aware as is today’s.” – Prince Reza Pahlavi, Winds of Change (Basmanji, 1.)

“Obama, Obama…either you are with us or you are with him! Obama, Obama either you are with us or you are with him!” – Protesters, 2009 Iranian Presidential Elections

“On clear days, when the blanket of smog does not totally block the view, residents of Tehran can enjoy the sight of the magnificent Damavand. A poet friend of mine likens Iranian youth to the towering mountain. Damavand has been dormant for millions of years although it still gives Sulphur fumes frequently. It might one day erupt without warning. But then it might also remain silent for thousands of years to come, slowly shaped and polished by the elements and the passage of time.” – Tehran Blues, Kaveh Basmenji

Introduction:

A large youth population within a country has become, in many cases, a characteristic of a developing nation. These large youth populations make up a significant percent of the total population, ages ranging from 18 to 30 years old. The nature, attitudes, and consciousness of this specific population, I believe greatly impacts the social, political, and economic culture of a
country. With this premise in mind, I decided to study one of the largest youth populations specific to a country, the current Iranian youth generation that is a result of the 1980s spike in religiously motivated procreation mandated by the Iranian theocratic regime. Iran’s current youth generation makes up a significant portion of the population and these young citizens are growing up within a regime that is purely religious in both practice and culture. In recent decades there has been a push back in Iran against the regime by the youth generation. This pushback has become increasingly political in nature.

I am arguing that the current youth generation in Iran has been developing a political consciousness that wants more economic, political and social freedoms under a theocratic regime. This generation is not rejecting but rather arguing for the natural progression of Islam that incorporates certain inherent freedoms. I will use *Persepolis*, an autobiographical graphic novel written by Marjane Satrapi, as a starting point for my argument and then cover these topics in chronological order: the relationship between Iran’s government and its citizens, the Iranian government’s abuse of religion, the internal divides among economic classes, and the 2009 Presidential Election protests. Once I have touched upon these topics, I will discuss how they have influenced one another, thus proving that the political consciousness of Iran’s youth generation has been cultivated through the decades. I will end with a final discussion about how this generation perceives God and religion and how these perceptions have impacted their growing political consciousness. I will conclude by tying my arguments back to Persepolis, which will offer a broader analysis of the cultural meanings and tensions embedded as well as triggered by Persepolis.

This youth population over the course of several decades has transgressed economic and class differences in order to become a highly politicized population. The effects of this
The youth generation in Iran is assuming their political position within the domestic and international political arena by educating themselves in order to demand their inherent freedoms. This is a three-step process and is why the political consciousness of the youth generation in Iran is in fact growing. The education element of this process is significant because I will demonstrate how many of the youth population is educated and yet unemployed. This paradox is a primary contributor to the growing unrest and distrust of the stagnant theocratic regime.

A crucial element of my paper will be the chronological order of my sources, so I will also dedicate a section of the appendix to explicitly outline the political atmosphere of Iran starting from the late 1990s until today. This timeline will provide evidence that the political consciousness of Iran’s youth generation is indeed growing. I want to make it clear that I am not arguing that Iran’s youth population wants a revolution or in any means has hit the peak of its political consciousness; rather that the mechanisms in place to foster political consciousness have been tapped into by this specific population in order to garner more freedoms and rights.

The Iranian Youth Population and Demographic

Today, there are about 80 million people living in Iran and 60% of these people are under the age of 30, making Iran have a substantially significant youth population. This youth population is due to a baby boom that was supported by the Iranian regime in the 1980s after the 1979 Revolution. In 1979 the Iranian citizens and religious leaders overthrew the Shah of Iran, for he was considered a puppet of the West that was neglecting and abusing his own citizens. Once Ayatollah Khomeini became the Supreme Leader of Iran and established a theocratic government – a government based on one religion - he urged the Iranian citizens to procreate for
Islam. Roughly 20-30 years later these baby boomers have become a very present and active force in Iran.

In 2003, 70% of the population of Iran was under the age of 25 and according to one Iranian citizen, Mohammed Azadi, “…the opinions of young people could be a driving political force in Iran” (Seikh). In 2005 the former President of Iran, President Hashemi Rafsanjani, actively engaged the youth in his re-election campaign and even “…made reaching out to youth a priority in his campaign” (Orlando Sentinel). For the rest of this paper I am going to work under the premise that due to the large size of this population, these youths have power to use when interacting and/or negotiating with both the domestic and international political arena.

It is crucial to point out some demographic themes about this youth population that inherently affects the ways in which they interact with each other and their government. In 2001, out of the 40 million people that were eligible to vote in the presidential election, 21 million of these people were considered part of the younger generation (Middle East News Online). This explicitly explains why presidential nominees began to cater campaigns towards wooing the young generation. While these youths possess the potential power to “control” politics, their economic power is limited and even more limited for women. While more youths are obtaining an education the unemployment rate grows significantly, with the female unemployment rate twice the rate of men in Iran (Basmenji, 46).

Due to the extreme lack of employment opportunities for these educated youth, “…the country…is facing an unprecedented brain drain among its university graduates, which has provoked state outcry” (Middle East News Online). This youth population is educated and thus able to understand their place in politics as their numbers continually grow. However, this population is dealing with the lack of economic security along with a plethora of social
restrictions, which I will discuss later in this paper. In sum, the youth generation of Iran has the potential to utilize its power in numbers to work with the Iranian regime to secure the reforms they want and more importantly their right to possess.

**Persepolis; an Autobiographical Graphic Novel**

*Persepolis* is an autobiographical graphic novel, published in 2003 that exposed the reality of growing up in post-revolutionary Iran. Marjane Satrapi’s two-party novel shows insight into the culture and nuances of Persian literature, life and custom. Satrapi goes into vivid illustrative detail about her experience as a woman living in Iran both as a young girl and young adult. Her experiences and narrative sparked dialogue among Iranian citizens within Iran and those who were exiled after the revolution. This novel has become a household name in these Persian families, purely for its raw and truthful recount of the painful lives of Iranians in the theocratic regime post revolution. My own family is of Iranian decent and I was able to witness a sense of solidarity that was cultivated among Iranians both within the US and Iran when this graphic novel was published and shared between Persian families and friends.

This book was the inspiration of my research topic. I compliment my analysis of the growing political consciousness of Iran’s youth population with this book because *Persepolis* offers a legitimate window into the thoughts and lives of Iranian youth based upon how positively the book was received by the world. This novel has now become a major motion picture and is the winner of the 2007 Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize. The Time Magazine praised Persepolis for how it, “…provides a unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life…That Satrapi chose to tell her remarkable story as a gorgeous comic book makes it totally unique and indispensible” (Satrapi). Satrapi wrote in her graphic novel that, “the more time passed, the more I became conscious of the contrast between the official
representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind the walls” (Satrapi, 304). This hidden narrative was what made her novel such a profound piece of literature and provided many young Iranians an outlet to express their individuality. Michelle Goldberg, a book review critic, discusses how two novels written by Iranian women, *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Iran*, show insight into the hidden lives and thoughts of Iranian women. Goldberg claims that, “…it’s inescapable that the one influence they [the two novels] share – the influence of the secret Tehran that rebels against religious despotism – binds them together…both books give hints that a defiant mood is spreading in the city” (Goldberg, 4). Goldberg states that these two novels are depicting a shared history and this depiction of history is telling of the current climate in Iran among the younger generation.

*Persepolis* can also be interpreted as a method of telling Iranian history. *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture*, written by Farzin Vejdani, is a record of how Iranian history was portrayed in Iran and its effect on a changing populace from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Vejdani argues that, “…the complex sets of interactions among a wide cross section of Iranian society – scholars, schoolteachers, students, intellectuals, women activists, government officials, and poets – were crucial in defining Iranian nationalism through the writing of history” (Vejdani, 3). The author is arguing that the means in which history was written in Iran – the collaboration among citizens that influenced society like scholars, schoolteachers, etc. – heavily shaped the political identity of the nation. The author claims that print culture during this time in Iran also contributed to the process of telling history. I use this book to bolster my intention of utilizing *Persepolis* as a piece of literature with significant cultural impact. Satrapi used literature to teach history. Through her own coming of age story, she comments on the evolving identity and nationalism of Iran’s youth from the
overthrow of the Shah’s to the late 1990s. Satrapi’s ability to tell a hidden Iranian narrative was not only appreciated by Iranians but also by high schools in the United States. One professor at John Bartram High School, a public high school in Philadelphia, decided to dedicate an entire semester to reading and interpreting *Persepolis*. The teacher argued that, “the use of Satrapi’s graphic novel enables students to look at the culture and history of Iran, the culture of women and Islam in the Middle East…the graphic novel *Persepolis* is an exemplary tool for teaching history and literature” (Carter, 1-2). *Persepolis* is an internationally well-respected graphic novel that transformed the way in which people throughout the world of all ages understood Iranian culture and history.

Towards the end of Satrapi’s novel she makes a poignant statement about the political culture of Iranians during the beginning of the 1990s. A decade after the Islamic Regime overthrew the monarchy; the abusive and restrictive nature of this Islamic regime took hold of its citizens to the point of submission. She states, “…the regime had absolute power…and most people in search of a cloud of happiness, had forgotten their political conscience” (Satrapi, 323). Satrapi’s novel is brilliant because it demonstrated how an entire population plagued with violence, fear and death deliberately “forgot” why they had overthrown the Shah in the first place. These citizens had demanded more economic and political freedom, and wanted to preserve the integrity of Iranian culture. Yet, once the Shah was overthrown and the first Ayatollah became the Supreme Leader, the theocratic regime abused their religious power and created a nation full of terror, thus making Iran a stricter and poorer nation than before. I will explain later in the paper how exactly the regime abused their religious power. However, Satrapi never lost her political consciousness; in fact she took the momentum of her constant questioning
of the regime and used it to create an outlet for the current youth generation to express their opinions.

A second review of the graphic novel *Persepolis* comments on how Satrapi’s novel demonstrated the more subtle means in which Iranian women conveyed their freedom of expression through the various ways in which they wore their hijab. The critic claims that, “the women of Iran can make a political statement, a cultural statement, a religious declaration, or a social proclamation without uttering a word” (University of West Florida). These women are able to accomplish this by wearing their hijabs against religious moral code of dress, otherwise known as the “hijab wars”. I wanted to tough upon this point because this subtle means of protest has expanded since Satrapi’s account of her youth in Iran and what made her graphic novel significant was that it allowed for the current youth generation to validate their protests and unhappiness with the current regime. The undeniable praise and recognition that this novel received is evidence to the widespread unhappiness of the Iranian population toward the theocratic regime.

**The Relationship Between the Iranian Government and its Citizens**

The relationship between the Iranian regime and its citizens is fascinating because the regime would not have existed without the support from the angry and passionate citizens of Iran in 1979. However, since the 1979 Revolution the regime has tried, with success, to limit the freedoms and power of its people while still maintaining a façade of contentment from the perspective of the citizens. The government facilitates this façade by targeting the growing youth population and their “success”. From my research, I was able to obtain an article that was published in Iran in 2001 and then disseminated among pro-Islamic media outlets, titled, “Brilliant Iranian Youth, Strong Evidence of Revolution’s Success.” The article argues that,
“…the status of the Iranian youth has greatly improved in the years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Today, the rights of the social class are respected, and no violation is tolerated against their rights” (Middle East News Online). In an article that was published as recent as 2009, just months before the violent Presidential Election protests, the Supreme Leader hails the “brilliant achievements of Iranian youth” and the Iranian regime is “…investing even greater hope it its highly educated brilliant youngsters” (Asia News Monitor). These two articles are significant because both address directly the youth population in Iran and the role they are playing within the regime as brilliant young minds.

However, there is a severe disconnect between how the regime portrays this population and the actual attitudes these youth feel towards the regime. In 1997, the youth population voted Mohammed Khatami, a reformist and tolerant politician, for the presidential seat because, “Many young people worked through the night to get out the vote for comparative moderate Mohammed Khatami, who they hope will block the Islamic clergy from tightening already rigorous religious controls on society” (Faruqi). Contrary to the aforementioned article, “Brilliant Iranian Youth, Strong Evidence of Revolution’s Success”, the Iranian youth’s rights were not being fully respected. This population actively promoted a presidential nominee that would focus on obtaining more freedoms and lessen religious restrictions. In addition, these ‘brilliant young minds’ do not have an outlet to practice what they have been educated, as proven earlier in the demographic section of this paper, and so the economic implications of this limitation had severe consequences for the Iranian regime starting in the late 2000s. Interestingly, the Iranian regime backed itself into a corner after emphasizing the role of this youth population to be the catalyst for innovation and brilliance. This is because the regime had to then become accountable and provide the youth population the opportunity to express such brilliance. However, this did not
happen and over the past decades, as mentioned previously, there has been a massive brain drain within Iran and those youths ‘left behind’ are beginning to aggressively call for an internal change to remedy this situation. I believe it is important to call out how the government perceived its citizens versus how the citizens perceived their government. This disconnect demonstrates that the youth generation of Iran is not as complacent with their regime as they were post-revolution. This generation starting in the early 21st century was beginning to question their regime, thus the beginning of their political consciousness.

The Government’s Use and Abuse of Religion: “Religious Betrayal”

I have mentioned the existence of religious restrictions and limitations of rights imposed on the youth generation, and for this section I will go into the specifics of these restrictions. It is imperative to distinguish that the actions of the Iranian regime that are “backed by religion” are in reality a form of religious betrayal, for Islam has been twisted and shaped into a dogmatic ideology to perpetuate the constant control of the regime over its citizens, and more specifically the youth generation. In 2001, when President Khatami was up for re-election, the Presidential Advisor and Head of the National Youth Organization in Iran, Morteza Mirbaqeri, urged the youth to vote in the next election in order to remedy the problems they saw within their government. Many of these issues stemmed from the relationship between religion and reform. A survey conducted by the National Youth Organization stated that,

“…Iranian youth have rather strong religious beliefs while they are also critical of the actual performance of the administrator…they youth expect the religious and revolutionary institutions to respond to their questions on religion with the present-day language as well as revise religious strategies as pioneers of faith” (Middle East News Online).
In other words, the youth of Iran in 2001 were not rejecting religion but rather wanting Islam to evolve with the times in order to incorporate the rights that this population desired. However, the symbiotic relationship between religion and reform would end abruptly after Khatami’s presidency and the beginning of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency.

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative nominee, was elected president and his presidency significantly changed the political atmosphere of Iran. During his time in office, the new conservative party manipulated an interpretation of Islam to generate a new form of politics that was reserved for an elite few and rejected the notion of democracy because, “…Iranians were genetically ill suited to being democrats” (Ansari, 71). In other words, the conservative faction of Iran manipulated the sacred text of Islam to further justify their own elitism and reject the call for economic, social, and political reforms through a democratic method of governance. Another aspect of Ahmadinejad’s presidency that shook the culture of the youth population to its core was the attack against intellectuals. Ali Ansari, author of Under Ahmadinejad: the politics of confrontation claims that, “…the repression of intellectual activity was therefore presented as an act of national purification…” because intellectuals had, “…polluted the purity of the Islamic revolution by importing strange disruptive ideas from the West” (Ansari, 77). In essence, this was framed as an Islamic propaganda movement. The once praised brilliant youth was starting to be attacked by the very government that promoted such education because this new consummation of education, practiced by the youth population, decreased the dependence on Islam as the only means of enlightenment.

Iran’s government manipulated Islam to further their elitist movement of submission and oppression. I will call this direct and obvious use of manipulation “religious betrayal” because the Islam many Iranians practice both within Iran and outside of its border does not align with
the Islam of the regime. The youth generation in Iran does not wish to expunge religion from their lives. These youths are asking for more freedoms within their social lives and demanding their inherent rights not be violated. These requests are directed at a government that has betrayed its people, and used religiously manipulated propaganda to control and subdue a nation.

In Iran there is the infamous “moral police”, which is a government organized group of both Iranian men and women part of the ‘Moral Police’ walk the streets of Iran looking to see if the civilians are breaking moral code by wearing “provocative” or “exposing” clothing. Protests have erupted in Iran, “…when the ‘moral police’, aided by Hezbollah…and Basij forced, raided boutiques and beat up girls wearing such outfits, considered un-Islamic by conservatives and hardliners” (Basmenji, 24).

Such abuses like these are not uncommon in Iran and the moral police are notorious for attacking the youth generation. My second cousin was once imprisoned and beaten up for attending a party where none of her direct male relatives were present. She was taken prisoner and was only released because of connections that her father possessed. These beatings are all in the name of Allah and justified by the Quran. However, as my cousin conveyed to me, this is not the Islam that she practices and it is not the Islam Mohammad preached centuries before. The regime’s Islam is a new dogmatic form of Islam used by the regime to garner complete control over its citizens. The difference between how the youth generation perceives Islam and how the regime manipulates Islam is one of the contributing factors to the growing political consciousness among the youth populace.

The Internal Economic Divides in Iran: The Labor Movement vs. The Green Movement

Throughout this paper I have only touched upon a certain class among the youth generation: middle to upper class educated youth. However, a significant portion of the youth
population in Iran belongs to the lower class. Under President Ahmadinejad, “…the economy collapsed, with inflation hitting 40 percent and GDP shrinking by over 7 percent in 2012” (Erlich). This economic collapse has severely hindered the youth population and their attempts at upward mobility. One scholar, Manata Hashemi, studied the potential social mobility among the poor youth in Iran, focusing on the motivations and aspirations that influence the distinct ways in which these poor youths reach a certain level of standard of living that they desire. She discovered that for this population, “…the strategies that poor young people deploy to better their lives emerge as a result of a particular type of social environment found in Iranian society that is centered on the dual pursuits of honor and work” (Hashemi, 1). Since this portion of the youth population makes up the majority of its populace, it is imperative to study this population when discussing the entire populace’s relation to political consciousness.

This population wants the ability to obtain a higher standard of living, which means that they are more focused on the economic policies and practices within Iran, rather than the social or civil opportunities. However, this population understands that these policies can go hand in hand with democratic aspirations. Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad in their article, Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy, argue that a new Labor Movement in Iran is developing, similar to the one that formed during the 1979 Revolution. However, this new Labor Movement is more politically conscious and wants to work with the democratic movement in Iran called the Green Movement, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section of this paper. Nomani and Behdad argue that, “…the working class is also coming to the realization that a forceful, independent labor movement and an advancing democratic movement are mutually interdependent” (Behdad, 1). The reason that this partnership is pinnacle to the success of both movements is because these two groups of
people encompass nearly the entirety of the Iranian youth population and promises both
economic and social/political prosperity. Ultimately, Nomani and Behdad claim that
socioeconomic justice is a plausible option for a united labor movement because, “…in this
situation, organizing the movement for democratic and socioeconomic justice can weaken the
existing power block and facilitate the democratization process in Iran” (Behdad, 12).

How such an independent labor movement took shape also is important to note when
discussing their relation to the current Iranian democratic movement. The Ministry of Labor does
not recognize independent trade unions in Iran, which means that strikes and protests related to
workers rights are hypothetically impossible, because the regime controls all mobilization.
However, in the early 2000s there was a surge in interest in both domestic and international labor
movements, which led, “…to the widespread translation of books on labor movements from
other countries and publication of books and journal articles on trade unionism, social
movements, civil society, politics and philosophy” (Behdad, 8). This was significant because the
upper to middle class Iranians during this time were already receiving an education. Now these
labor activists, many part of the lower class, were claiming their status as educated intellects
interested in government reforms. In addition, due to current technological advancements
globally, the poor youth population can afford to participate within the spaces where democratic
movements are taking shape, via social media outlets (Erlich).

In sum, the political consciousness of Iran’s youth must incorporate its poorer populace;
otherwise any democratic movement without an economic emphasis will be futile. I believe that
class difference is imperative to incorporate into my analysis of a growing political
consciousness because the mass mobilization of militant workers and labor activists for
independent labor organizations “…is unprecedented in the history of the Iranian labor
movement” (Behdad, 9). The labor movement in Iran is as much a demonstration of a growing political consciousness as the political reform movements that manifested during the 2009 presidential election protests.

The 2009 Presidential Election Protests

The 2009 Presidential Election in Iran was a politically significant moment in Iran’s history, especially for the youth generation. During the 2009 election year incumbent President Ahmadinejad was up for re-election and ran against one particularly popular opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. This election had the first televised debate. During this debate, Iran’s youth population saw Ahmadinejad’s unprofessional and vulgar personality in comparison with the refined and moderate nominee Mousavi. This stark difference in personalities and professionalism sparked the political conscious of the youth (For Neda, HBO Documentary). In an op-ed piece by Ja’far Golbai, he states that,

“…Our young people have come back and are creating another grand event…with them, we can defeat any trouble, obstacle or difficulty. This genuine and rich human force, more than any other tool, is useful for the country’s continuous and positive movement…In face of this huge mass of young people who are warming up the electoral scene…we just can bow down and give our tears of joy to them” (BBC Monitoring Middle East).

This emotional sentiment for the youth’s political energy was carried throughout Iran and to those who been exiled since the 1979 Revolution. My own family was glued to the television as the election unfolded, completely and entirely mesmerized by the actions of the youth generation, as this population grew to nearly entirely support the moderate nominee, Mousavi.
Then on June 13th it was announced that President Ahmadinejad had won the presidential election with nearly 63 percent of the vote. The re-election of Ahmadinejad was evidence that a fraudulent election had taken place and three days later thousands of pro-Mousavi supporters took to the streets of Tehran in protest. As the protestors gained momentum, the violence against these peaceful protests escalated while the regime refused to admit that a fraudulent election had taken place (Asia News Monitor). On June 20th Neda Agha-Soltan, a young Iranian woman, was shot and murdered during one of these protests, and the political atmosphere in Iran shifted significantly. An HBO documentary made about Neda’s life and the implications of her murder in Iran claimed that Neda’s death became the most broadcasted death of a martyr in global history (For Neda, HBO Documentary). The youth within Iran dealt with Neda’s murder by continuing the protests and backlash against the regime. The regime knew that Neda’s death was a catalyst that could break up the theocratic regime and tried a plethora of attempts to cover up her murder, to no avail. What came out of these protests and the dearth of Neda was the political Green Movement that still exists today. The Green Movement was the name of the political movement in Iran that took to the streets demanding more political, social and civil freedoms in Iran (For Neda, HBO Documentary).

Both of my second cousins were on the streets protesting the fraudulent election, and continued protesting even after Neda’s murder. It was terrifying for them and yet they never once questioned coming out to protest because they knew that what they were protesting for was right and that strength in numbers was what overthrew the last regime. However, the Green Movement was unsuccessful in that it neglected to incorporate the Labor Movement into its protesting and while many of Iran’s youth population was out on the streets advocating for more social and political freedoms, the economic freedoms that would have brought out millions of more Iranians
were not even addressed. Eventually, the regime withstood the protesting and many youths, like my cousins, had to flee the country because of their political protesting against the regime. My cousins are here now in the Untied States, yet wish for the day when they can return to their country and continue the fight for the inherent social and political rights that they deserve. The 2009 Presidential election protests did not lead to a revolution but it did permanently change the lives of the Iranian youth. This youth populace now experienced a sense of agency, one that was heavily oppressed after the 1979 Revolution.

**The Progression of a Political Consciousness**

The year 2009 was the turning point for Iran’s youth population and the political climate and culture would not return to the docile state described in *Persepolis*. By looking at the timeline of the sources, the primary focus of news coming from Iran focused predominantly on the youth population and their role in the 2009 presidential elections. There was an influx in political participation by the Iranian youth, and the same men and women who had actively voted for a less radical president only a decade earlier, were joined by their younger counterparts that equally desired a political regime with less strict regulations and religious laws. From these articles I realized that those commenting on the political atmosphere of Iran truly believed that the youth population held much of the power and ability to enact the change they desired. I would argue that the youth population also was well aware of this power, and this knowledge fueled their reason to risk beatings and death. The moment that these youth decided it was worth risking their lives for a change in politics was the moment that their political consciousness grew to a point of no return, in my opinion.

The aftermath of the 2009 presidential election also proves my argument that the political consciousness had evolved into a force that indeed threatened the religious regime. Amnesty
International’s records indicated that the violence perpetrated by the Iranian government was severe and did not end on the streets but continued within the prisons that housed countless protesters (Peterson). This demonstrates that a political conscious is not just in reference to one’s identity but most undoubtedly plays out in one’s actions, and the youth of Iran took to the streets in protest because of their growing political consciousness. By the time the obviously rigged election results were announced, Iran’s youth were ready to fight back. They were taunted by the notion of free and fair elections with an open debate. It was Neda’s death that also sparked outrage amongst the youth population, which was evidently seen in the HBO documentary, *For Neda* that was mentioned earlier in the paper.

However, it was not just the reaction of the youth population that proves the existence of an elevated political consciousness, but also how the religious regime responded to such an event. A regime founded on the principles of oppression and obedience does not want its largest portion of the population to formulate opinions and be driven to act in ways that disintegrate the fabric of oppression. Within the HBO documentary, we see the government trying to diminish the power of Neda’s death because they knew that her becoming a martyr fueled the youth’s thirst for political and social freedom. Once the protests commenced in the streets and millions of Iran’s population demonstrated their anger, the regime knew that part of the political identity of their citizens that had been made docile after the 1979 revolution had cracked. This break in the political identity of Iran’s youth population, that never witnessed the Shah’s regime and only knew a severely dogmatic theocracy, was the beginning point of a political consciousness that would not stop until social, economic, and political rights were gained and sustained.

The momentum from the 2009 presidential election presumably stopped, for the theocracy was not overturn and the protests ended without significant gains in the freedoms these
youths protested for. However, I believe that the momentum from the 2009 presidential election did not dissipate, but instead simply pivoted its purpose. I argue that the Iranian youth do not want a dramatic revolution that could severely hurt their economy. They want reforms within the theocracy that they exist in, which is played out in the intersection between the Labor Movement and the Green Movement. In essence, Iran’s youth population is a group of practical agents of politics from all classes that understand their role both domestically and internationally when it comes to issues related to Islam and how that affects their inherent freedoms.

The Current Political Consciousness

There have been recent developments in Iran regarding the youth population that provide evidence of a continually growing political consciousness. First, in 2015 a Nuclear Deal with Iran transpired that involved many international stakeholders and required that Iran, “…sharply reduce productions of nuclear material and adhere to stringent inspections of its nuclear power program” (Erlich). If Iran adhered to these rules then the UN would lift certain economic sanctions. The youth generation in Iran greatly supported this deal because they were the ones hit hardest by the economic sanctions. Javad Etaat, an associate professor of political science at Beheshti University, claimed that the unemployment crisis is one of the reasons that students have decided to join the ‘newly invigorated reform movement’. Foad Izadi, an associate professor at the University of Tehran, argues that, “…the surplus of overqualified graduates ‘is a serious problem’” (Erlich) and these educated youths are fed up with the lack of employment opportunities. This youth generation condemns government-funded terrorist spending, and asserts that the government should be more focused on Iran’s domestic economy. In an article published by the South Florida Sun – Sentinel, the authors argue that “…these young people…are convinced that the Iran nuclear agreement will greatly improve the prospects for
Iran gradually moving in a positive direction, one that erodes the tyranny of hardline clerics” (Berlow). The youth of Iran supporting a deal that predominantly involved Western stakeholders is a demonstration that these citizens understand their political roles on an international level. By assuming their appropriate roles, this generation has garnered the ability to obtain economic rights. Earlier in the paper I discussed how obtaining economic rights is equally as important for a growing political consciousness as is obtaining social and/or political rights.

Another development that represents the growing political consciousness is the expanding dismissal of government sanctioned censorship practices by the youth generation. Within Iran, all news and political sites that are ‘deemed hostile to the government’ are blocked, which means that media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are outright banned and BBC Persian and Green Movement sites published outside of Iran are barred from reaching the general Iranian populace (Erlich). However, these bans on media outlets have not stopped Iranians and Professor Etaat states that, “Iran has changed a lot…before the Revolution, the religious people wouldn’t even watch TV. Now, according to our statistics, the use of social media in Iran is equal to that in the West” (Erlich). This generation in Iran has entered the technology era and continues to capitalize on its ability to disseminate and consume information and ideas. In Iran, satellite television is also banned because it supposedly spreads ‘decadent Western culture’. However, Kaveh Basmenji, author of Tehran Blues, states that, “…the ban is widely ignored and thousands of people watch foreign and exile-Iranian television stations using dish antennae…” (Basmenji, 52) meaning that these citizens are simply refusing to follow their regime’s orders. These people are willing to defy their regime’s orders because the information and entrainment gained from these sources outweighs the consequences. I believe that this is a significant finding because in the 1980s and 1990s, Iranians were complacent with their government. Now, nearly
two decades later, the citizens of Iran, which is significantly comprised of youths, are dismissing these strict rules and taking the risk and initiative to educate themselves.

The current youth generation in Iran is dealing with both economic and technological influences from the West. Their relationship to the West is not one of dependence, but rather of a potential partnership. I do not believe that this generation wants to ‘conform to the West’. I argue that this generation understands the inherent economic, social and political freedoms that are said to exist in the West and want these freedoms to be addressed by their theocratic regime. The political consciousness growing in Iran is an inclination towards collaboration between the West and Iran’s youth generation. This youth generation needs both domestic and international support, for this is not the generation that held American hostages 36 years ago. This youth generation wants economic security matched with social and civil liberties within an Islamic framework.

A Progressive Islam

Throughout this paper I have only touched upon Iran’s youth generation’s feelings toward religion, and more specifically Islam. I want to use this subtopic to expand upon how exactly the youth generation perceives Islam and why this generation is not calling for a revolution but rather a progressive Islam. “A sociological approach to the concept of God amongst Iranian youth” is a journal article that discusses how young Iranians perceive God and how this perception affects their day-to-day lives. The study was conducted in Shiraz, Iran in 2011 and had 73 participants between the ages of 15 to 28. After conducting numerous interviews the authors came to the conclusion that:

“Modern media, familiarity with a variety of religions and cultures, the expansion of the culture of consuming and tendency towards fashion and also the growth of modern
education and rationalism are all factors that force the youth towards critical thinking and reflection about religion and the concept of the socially dominant notions of God” (Ahmadi, 10).

This is a meaningful finding because it proves my argument that these youths are in fact questioning Islam, but they are not rejecting it. Many of the participants noted God as the meaning of their world and life and when given the opportunity to question their faith, they would indeed return to Islam. The authors found that in ‘democratic religious families’, where personal and individual freedom was respected by all family members, nearly everyone within these families believed in God and valued their ability ‘to find God freely’ (Ahmadi, 3-5). This youth generation under no circumstances is abandoning their faith; they are simply becoming progressive Muslims and asking for a more moderate theocratic regime. The growing political consciousness among Iranian youth has incorporated Islam into their identity. Professor Etaat argues that the majority of the current reform movements are made up of young people in Iran. These young people are practicing Muslims and to them, “…religion runs deep in Iran because of the culture. It’s their own personal belief” (Erlich). Islam is a part of Iranian culture and I firmly believe that this generation wants to keep their religious culture intact; they want to be identified as Islamic. However, they are trying to foster their Islamic identity within a regime that has betrayed them and has abused its religious authority. This betrayal is why the youth generation is asking for a progressive Islam and it is why their political consciousness has continued to grow over the past several decades.

Conclusion:

I would like to conclude my findings by bringing the focus back to Persepolis. This graphic novel was my inspiration because it is a piece of literature that impacted an entire
nationhood. Many Iranians exist outside of Iran’s border because of political and religious persecution. This novel was a window for these people to see inside the world of the Iranian youth post-Revolution. This graphic novel also was an outlet for the current youth generation to express their unhappiness with the regime. Finally, *Persepolis* was a demonstration of true history and a shared narrative among a populace that was becoming more politically conscious. Within Satrapi’s novel we see the struggle between family and faith, freedom and religion and identity and nationalism. These struggles perfectly define the issues that the current youth generation in Iran is facing. These youths are a politically active populace that has transgressed social and economic classes in order to create a fundamentally inclusive and educated movement. The melding of the Labor Movement with the Green Movement in recent years shows the pragmatic nature of this generation. This generation’s ability to hold unto their religious identity while advocating for more economic, political and social freedoms is a testament to their strength.

This topic is very close to my heart for I am of Iranian decent and my family had to flee Iran after the 1979 Revolution and after the 2009 Presidential Election protests. My family looks to Iran and hopes for a change. They look to the youth of Iran and pray that these citizens will obtain the freedoms that they undeniably deserve. My family sees a political consciousness growing in the hearts of these youths. This consciousness will be the reason Iran could become a great nation like it was nearly thousands of years ago, when education, innovation, and culture were cultivated and deeply respected. I will end with one takeaway that I believe is imperative to understand. This generation needs the support from international stakeholders, like the West. However, this support cannot be shrouded with stigmas and western conformity. Right now the youth generation is in a perplexing situation, because while they have the momentum to enact
change they also could easily be oppressed by the regime if they do not receive internal and external support. The growing political consciousness of Iran’s youth is significant because this generation could potentially alter the entire political climate of the Middle East. While this may seem to be a grand statement, I firmly believe that Iran is a powerhouse within this region and when such an influential nation enacts meaningful reforms, its influence spreads to its allies and neighboring nations.

Appendix:

Timeline of Iranian Presidents since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (BBC Middle East News):

- **1980 January**: Abolhasan Bani-Sadr elected first president
- **1981 June**: Bani-Sadr is dismissed and flees to France
- **1989 August**: Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani elected president
- **1997 May**: Mohammad Khatami elected president with 70% of the vote
- **2001 June**: President Khatami is re-elected
- **2005 June**: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is elected
- **2009 July**: President Ahmadinejad is sworn is for a second term of presidency
- **2013 June**: Hassan Rouhani elected president with 50% of the vote

Timeline of Primary Sources:

- **23 May 1997**: “Iranian vote offers distinct choices, Youth hope moderate Khatami will block Islamic clergy from tightening religious control”
- **2000**: The Complete Works of Persepolis
- **01 January 2001**: “Iranian Youth Shun Religion, Prayers After Entering School”
- **28 Apr 2001**: “Iranian Youth are Religion-minded but politically critical NYO official”
- **29 Aug 2001**: “Brilliant Iranian Youth, Strong Evidence of Revolution’s Success”
- 08 June 2003: “Iranian youth divided on future; Under-25s make up 70 per cent of Iran’s population but what do they want and how bad do they want it?”
- 12 June 2005: “Former Iranian president reaches out to youth in bid for re-election”
- 16 Feb 2009: “Iran: Supreme Leader Hails Brilliant Achievements of Iranian Youth”
- 08 June 2009: “Polls bring Iranian youth back to the political scene – paper”
- 05 Nov 2009: “In Iran, rival rallies show rift endures; Clashes erupt as regime marks 30th anniversary of U.S. Embassy siege”
- 01 June 2010: For Neda, HBO Documentary
- 27 Jan 2015: “Iran: World Media Highlight Iranian Leader’s Letter to Western Youth on Islam, Prejudice”
- 07 Sept 2015: “Iranian youth need our support”
- 08 Sept 2015: “Why Iranian youth are endorsing the nuclear agreement”

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