Unrealized Professional Aspirations inside Iran:

The Lived Experiences of Sharif University Graduates



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Abstract

Discussions surrounding employability and job market aspirations of university graduates has been discussed across many disciplines, generations, and countries. In recent history, the global debate evolved twice due to the 2008 recession and the 2019 coronavirus pandemic. However, most debates continue to pivot around neo-liberal arguments of capital investments and an individual's ability to adapt and persevere towards job market successes. Contrarily, these mostly Western-centered debates are not entirely sufficient when examining a non-Western country such as Iran, and its graduates' lived experiences as they progress from higher education into the job market. If these Western understandings do not accurately explain the factors and actors involved in the Iranian context then should these arguments be revised? Or, has the Iranian State's allotment of precarious access to the country left too little research and too many questions regarding employability, professional aspirations, and job market expectations of graduates inside Iran?

This thesis was the first of its kind to focus on graduates of Sharif University and investigated the following research question: how have Sharif graduates' professional aspirations been shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences? The study was designed as a biographical approach focusing on the individual lived experiences of men with a bachelor's degree in engineering from the nation's top university – Sharif. For security reasons, that will be explained below, women graduates were not interviewed. I intimately engaged with my five participants through four rounds of qualitative in-depth interviewing, with round three including a participant timeline. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to select participants who varied in terms of their economic status, geographical upbringing, religious beliefs, ethnicity, pre-university education, and specialization in engineering. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Tehran, Iran.

Participants reported experiencing, and often struggling with, certain obstacles that they perceived were imposed upon them by educational institutions, governmental entities, and State agencies that I call tentacles of the State. The participants narrated their encounters with these institutions and the people in the lives as a one-dimensional pathway they felt bounded by. Simultaneously, they recounted promises of a guaranteed successful life if they followed the one-dimensional pathway – that was veiled within the human capital argument. As the participants detailed their maturation from pre-university to within-university and into post-graduation, elements of the State increasingly emerged as key actors in ensuring the one-dimensional pathway was followed. The examples the participants provided illustrated an Iranian context as being contrary to a predominantly Western perspective where a fluid State system leaves opportunities for professional growth, societal progress, and institutional change. On the one hand, the participants grew up with underdeveloped individual aspirations that enmeshed with State expectations that left them uncertain about the guaranteed future they were promised. On the other hand, tensions grew as the participants identified their aspirations and invested in capitals but continued to feel limited in navigating the one-dimensional pathway inside Iran to try to realize their own aspirations.

The existing scholarship does not position the State as an active enabler of obstructing, diverting, and opposing graduates' professional aspirations. The contribution of this study is the argument that a State, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran – which has been debated as an authoritarian and oligarchical state (Azimi, 2009) – can reframe promises of human capital theory and employability to reduce its graduates to a one-dimensional aspiration irrespective of how much the participants invested in capitals and improved their employability. Thus, an alternative way of thinking may be necessary in trying to understand the factors and actors that effect job market struggles.

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List of Abbreviations

BERA – British Educational Research Association

BLS – Bootstrapped Lean Start-ups

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

COVID – Corona Virus Disease

CUREC – Central University Research Ethics Committee

DISC – dominance, inducement, submission, compliance assessment

DREC – Departmental Research Ethics Committees

GPA – grade point average

GRE – Graduate Record Examinations

GPS – global positioning system

IBM – International Business Machines Corporation

ID – identity document

ILO – International Labor Organization

IQ – intelligence quotient

IT – information technology

MBA – Master of Business Administration

MBTI – Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

MI6 – Military Intelligence Section 6

MIT – Massachusetts Institute of Technology

NDA – Non-Disclosure Agreement

STEM – science, technology, engineering, math

STEMM – science, technology, engineering, math, medicine

TOEFL – Test of English as a Foreign Language

TV – television

URL – Uniform Resource Locator

US – United States

USD – United States Dollars

Glossary of key Persian terms

Aberu – honor or reputation

Bekar – unemployed

Dalal – literal translation is, broker. However, in Iran, it has been stigmatized with labels of thievery, chicanery, and immorality.

Daneshgah Azad Islami – Islamic Azad University

Dolati – a State or government company

Gaj – a corporation that provides *konkur* related services through – but not limited to – programs, classes, training, and preparation.

Galamchi – a corporation that provides *konkur* related services through – but not limited to – programs, classes, training, and preparation.

Ghayre-khodi – literal translation is, 'not of us' or 'other'. Individuals who do not have a connection to the State or government. Therefore, they do not necessarily have access to, or can gain, advantages from that connection like the *khodi.* Moreover, they may also experience the denial or limitation in certain aspects of life inside Iran because they are considered *ghayre-khodi*.

Khodi – literal translation is, 'of us' or 'us'. Individuals with a connection to the State or government. This connection can be through – but not limited to – employment, family, marriage, association, or allegiance. With this connection, certain – but not limited to – social, economic, religious, political, financial, business, investment, cultural, concessions, privileges, advantages, and benefits are available to these individuals. As a member of the *khodi*, one theoretically upholds, advocates, and at times enforces the ideology of the *khodi* and the State. Which ensures their existential longevity, financial security, and power and influence over how the government is ran and what direction the country goes.

Khusulati – a company that is partially owned by the private sector and partially owned by the State or *khodi*. *Khusulati* companies have become another way – in addition to the monopolization of the religious, financial, and media sectors – that the *khodi* has monopolized the business sector and therefore the job market.

Khususi – a private company

Khanzadeh – *Unrealized Professional Aspirations inside Iran*

Konkur – a derivative of the French word *concour* meaning competition. Similar to the French exam, Iran's *konkur* is the country's higher education entrance exam.

Payām-e Nur – State distance-learning University

Sarbazi – literal translation is, military. It also means the two-year mandatory service every adult male of sound mind and body must complete.

Sharifi – individuals with a current or prior affiliation to the University of Sharif either as a student or graduate.

Sazman Sanjesh – the National Organization for Educational Testing – a branch of the State that administers the *konkur* and decides what major/university each applicant is eligible for and offers admissions into four-year universities.

Velayat-e Faqih – Supreme Leader – the ruler of Iran

بسم الله

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Rest in peace my beloved grandmother Madar Tuba and uncle Hassan.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In this study I investigate how Sharif graduates' professional aspirations are shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences. The main concepts that will be discussed throughout this study are professional aspiration and employability. I begin this chapter by discussing the theoretical gap in the human capital perspective. I detail how this issue is debated within the wider literature and the similarities and differences the Iranian context has within these conversations. I then draw out three areas in the literature and research that this study aims to contribute to. In section two I lay out the purpose of this study by explaining what I investigated, who I studied, where I conducted my research, and how I approached the research. In section three I present my research question, and in section four I outline the chapters of this study.

1.1 Problem statement

1.1.1 Theoretical gap in the human capital perspective

The global conversation on job market returns and employment concerns continues to invoke robust debates; especially since the 2008 recession (Livanos, 2010; Oreopoulos et al., 2012; Tomic, 2014), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Blustein et al., 2020; Chodorow-Reich & Coglianese, 2021; Kawohl & Nordt, 2020). Independent of such catastrophic events, job markets and higher education institutions continue to struggle with, and the global literature continues to discuss, issues such as socio-economic concerns (Denny & Harmon, 2000; Granovetter, 1995; Livanos, 2010), (rapid) growth of higher education (Bai, 2006), a surplus of graduates into the job market (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004), a mismatch between supply and demand (Liagouras et al., 2003), a disconnect between knowledge and skills (Dabalen et al., 2001), and societal influences on career choice (e.g., Hoffman, 1974; Jackson et al., 1993;

Lent & Brown, 1996). Likewise, Iran's job market and higher education system have experienced similar obstacles.

One discussion within the global literature is the human capital argument, and the theory's claim that an individual's investment in oneself through "education […] internal migration [and] the use of leisure time to improve skills and knowledge" leads to job market success (Schultz, 1961, p. 4). Moreover, a graduate's job market returns, and employability, also derives from the different capitals they can invest in, such as cultural, personal, reputational, and/or social (Tholen, 2017). Thus, by investing in oneself – by means of education, training, and other pertinent activities – a graduate can realize their professional aspirations. Even if their environment and conditions are not conducive, the individual will find a way to realize their aspiration. If they do not, then there is something wrong with their approach and they must restrategize (Becker, 1993). Such arguments from the human capital perspective have continued to dominate the global debate (Ashwin, 2020; Marginson, 2019).

On the other hand, there are counter arguments (e.g., Brown, 2001; Tholen, 2015) that human capital theory – and the neo-liberal premise of a capitalistic market of privatization, deregulation, and competition that underpin the theory – is flawed within contexts that are not comparable to this 20th century Western lens (Piketty, 2014). For example, the human capital arguments do not appear to be entirely sufficient when examining Iranian graduates' lived experiences from higher education to Iran's job market because of Iran's political, economic, social, and cultural context. Specifically, the country's State is not viewed as a fluid system leaving opportunities for professional growth, societal progress, and institutional change, like in most Western contexts where human capital theory is discussed. Moreover, while human capital theory does not capture the social aspect of the job market due to its economic approach, its application within the Iranian context highlights further limitations of the theory as well as its criticisms.

The literature that does critique human capital theory does not sufficiently problematize the power of the State in the broken promise of human capital theory. This study, therefore, deepens and extends the critique on human capital theory by mapping the power of the State in relation to individuals. Thus, the growing body of literature that critiques human capital theory is the first area where this study resides by applying critical ideas to a non-Western context. I examine the role of the Iranian State in relation to graduates' professional aspirations and employability vis-à-vis the educational institutions, governmental entities, and job market uncertainties they must navigate. I build on the wider discourse by problematizing the existing literature rooted in human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1993), as well as policy rooted in neo-liberal approaches, that frame employability and aspirational attainment in terms of individual agency (Fugate et al., 2004; Nilsson, 2010; Tholen, 2015). Thus, I draw inspiration from the work of Brown et al. (2011) in their critique of the broken promises of human capital theory. Where Brown et al. (2011) discussed broken promises of education, jobs and incomes, this study adds a broken promise in the complex dynamic between the State and the individual in an Iranian context that appears significantly different than the Western-centered context where the State is seemingly more fluid in their relationship with its citizenry. Therefore, allowing an increased likelihood in professional growth, societal progress, and institutional change. Within the Iranian context, however, the individual seems to have a tense relationship with a more rigid State that initially offers promises of returns on their human capital investments but eventually limits those returns within State parameters.

1.1.2 Methodological gap in the study of Iranian graduates

The tense relationship between Iranian graduates and the country's educational institutions, governmental entities, and tentacles[1] of the State can date back to the 1979 Islamic revolution.

[1] The term tentacles refers to agencies and aspects of the State that maintain the inflexibility of the State by enforcing the status quo while also benefiting from the norms that develop as a result. These tentacles of influence will be discussed at great length but briefly they refer to the *khodi*, *khusulati*, and mafia.

Iran's school system, higher education system, and job market has struggled to progress as a result of many domestic and international issues since 1979 and the subsequent rise and formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Examples of the country's domestic issues include: poor policy decisions; financial corruption; political nepotism; widening ideological and class gaps; social injustices; economic instability; very limited freedoms of press, speech, and religion; human rights violations; and civil unrest, protests, demonstrations, and riots met with government crackdown (Barsamian, 2020). These domestic issues have been further compounded by the Islamic Republic's focus on regional conflicts and international activities: such as, cyber war against the United States; nuclear ambitions in defiance of international protocols; zero-sum proxy wars against the United States in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; a (maritime) shadow war with Israel, as well as a proxy war against Israel through Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan; proxy wars against Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and a soft power war against Saudi Arabia in Pakistan and Bahrain (Barsamian, 2020). As a result, Iran – and more specifically the Iranian people – have been under sanctions by the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations (Amuzegar, 2004; Hamdhaidari et al., 2008; Kousha & Abdoli, 2004).

In trying to explain the perspective of the Iranian graduate within this Iranian context, the existing literature can be largely categorized in two ways: the local debates inside Iran, and the non-local debates from external observers or the diasporic community. Regarding the former, local Iranian scholars have discussed issues such as graduate unemployment – vis-a-vis higher education and the job market – through a quantitative, operational, and economic lens (Alashloo et al., 2005; Amini et al., 2013; Bazargan, 2000; Hashemi et al., 2012; Naji et al., 2016).

These scholars have identified methodological gaps in the research that require further investigation. For example, Bazargan (2000, p. 176) states that "tertiary institutions have not

paid enough attention to assisting graduates in the employment process" and suggests "follow-up studies on university graduates […] to show the current trends of graduate unemployment". Alibaygi et al. (2013, p. 680) asserts "the employability of students be further investigated utilizing qualitative methodologies". And Mojgan et al. (2011, p. 33) argued that "it would be beneficial to explore the possible sources of anxiety in counseling sessions" with "further research […] to investigate the influence of other factors on career indecision". This methodological gap in the research is another area in the literature where the study will contribute by directly engaging with graduates inside Iran.

1.1.3 Research gap in the Iranian context

The non-local literature has worked towards filling this gap by taking a more qualitative approach. However, most of the published work on Iran in the 21st century has been argued to be homogenously focused on political and social struggles between the citizens and the State (Malekzadeh, 2016). Although such literature (Khosravi, 2008; Mahdavi, 2009; Varzi, 2006; Yaghmaian, 2002) has received critical acclaim, I agree with Olszewska's (2013, p. 842) criticism that the work from the diasporic academic community that focuses on the youth presents a narrative of "acts of resistance to and rebellion against the political establishment" when that tension is more complex. Olszewska goes on to identify the shortcomings in the literature as studies that "posits the existence of a unitary society positioned in irreconcilable opposition to a monolithic State [where] there is little accounting for diversity and hierarchies [and] the assumption is that there is a single fault line of struggle in society" (p. 844). This third gap in the literature, regarding the homogenous focus on political and social tension, is another area where this study will contribute a more complex understanding by investigating graduates' lived experiences and tensions with their educational institutions, precarious job market, governmental entities, and tentacles of the State.

The tense relationship between Iranian graduates and these institutions has also been debated in local conversations outside academia. One commonality within these local discussions is the years – and often decades – in which public debates have become repetitious and persist to identify shortcomings and recommended reforms, but with very limited change. Many of the issues that were brought to light in the local literature shared similarities with the wider literature. One key difference, however, appears to be the very limited change recorded in Iran's local discourse. For example, Iran's school system shares similar problems with the rest of world, from little funding (Leachman et al., 2017; Payne & Biddle, 1999), limited facilities and capabilities (Asiyai, 2012; Schneider, 2003), substandard teaching quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Singh & Sarkar, 2012), and lack of guidance and support (House & Hayes, 2002; Johnson & Rochkind, 2010). However, unlike many countries aiming to improve these problems, the calls for change and improvements within Iran has been reported to be ignored (Ghanuni & Ghaltash, 2019; *"Negarani az Ejbar"*, 2016). Similarly, private schools have comparable shortcomings with the broader discourse (Caddell, 2006; Dronkers & Robert, 2003) but again the Iranian government has been reported to overlook calls for change (H. Hashemi, 2020; Rabiei & Salehi, 2007). Moreover, local conversations on misguidance or directed guidance that relates to the push towards or pull away from certain majors are similar to global debates (Corwin et al., 2004; Ireh, 1999; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; Orndorff & Herr, 1996; Staff et al., 2010; Tien et al., 2005; Wambu & Fisher, 2015). However, the very limited change reported within the Iranian context is visible (Afrooz, 2002; *"Chera daneshamuzane nokhbeh"*, 2014; *"Ejraie siasate tosiye"*, 2019; *"Ertebate madares"*, 2018; "*Tahre ertebate madares*", 2018; Talebi, 2012; "*Ulume ensani dar Iran*", 2019).

These scholarly and local debates suggests that the State systems within Iran is not as fluid as its Western counterparts in regards to their relationship with graduates in order to enable positive change. This may further suggest that the complex tension between graduates and their

educational institutions, precarious job market, governmental entities, and tentacles of the State within the Iranian context goes beyond political and social struggles and also identifies aspirational and employability issues; which then further problematizes the Western view on a graduates' journey from higher education where investing in human capital and improving employability bears a return within the job market.

1.2 Purpose statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the individual lived experiences of five young men with a bachelor's degree in engineering from the nation's top university – Sharif – and how their professional aspirations and expectations develop over time as they navigate Iran's highly-centralized educational institutions and precarious job market. This study engaged with these five participants through four rounds of qualitative in-depth interviewing, with round three including a participant timeline. The participants' lived experiences during pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation is explored to gain a deeper understanding of the graduates' relationship with and navigation through Iran's educational institutions and job market, vis-à-vis their academic and professional maturation, capital investments, and employability as they try to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. The meaning of professional aspiration in this study is an individual's ideas of their possible selves, what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become (Haas, 1992; Markus & Nurius, 1986); or as Appadurai (2013, p. 187) explains it, one's "wants, preferences, choices, and calculations". The meaning of employability in this study is adopted from Tomlinson's (2007, p. 287) understanding of employability as a concept "that should be conceptualized as a form of identity; it is relational, emergent and influenced largely by graduates' lived experience of the job market". A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to select participants who varied in terms of their economic status,

geographical upbringing, religious beliefs, ethnicity, pre-university education, and specialization in engineering. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Tehran, Iran.

My access in and around Iran was mostly unencumbered. There were some limitations based on safety protocols, religious, cultural, societal edict, and time constraints of a doctoral study. Regarding safety protocols, there were instances of protests, and at times riots, during my seven-month fieldwork in Iran (June 2019 to January 2020) which were further compounded with the government shutting down the internet for a week and further protests ensuing. Also, international crises escalated with the United States assassinating Iran's top general – Qasem Soleimani in Iraq – and Iran accidently shooting down a Ukrainian commercial airplane mistaken for a U.S. cruise missile. Therefore, I restricted my mobility throughout Tehran and shortened my stay in Iran.

Regarding religious, cultural, and societal edict, I limited my research to men only. I did not want to jeopardize my safety and the safety of my participants since it is against the law in Iran for a man to be alone with a woman if she is not his grandmother, mother, aunt, sister, daughter, or wife. There are exceptions to this rule depending on where one were to meet, but I did not see this as a risk worth taking. Moreover, while the exclusion of women does limit the work, I believe the novelty of the research lays the foundation for future research that can focus on women graduates from Sharif – or any other university.

Regarding the time constraint of a doctoral study, but also in conjunction with methodological literature, I limited the number of participants. The decision to focus on five participants was influenced by the literature (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). Considering my time limit in completing this research and examining the participants' individual lived experiences through an in-depth qualitative account which places an emphasis on the depth of the analysis, having too many participants can cause a decline in the quality and quantity of information gathered,

as well as the depth in each participant being studied (Creswell, 2007). However, I again believe the novelty of my study compensates for the limited number of its participants and lays the foundational work for future research that can expand off of my work to include more participants and/or more universities.

The decision to focus on Sharif graduates resulted out of decades of personal, professional, and academic experiences. As my concern and interest grew regarding the struggles Iran's youth experienced, I discovered an apparent anomaly within the narrative of youth and graduate struggles in an uncertain Iranian job market. The life trajectories of Sharif graduates were viewed by Iranian society as success stories, regardless of whether the graduate stayed or left Iran. Sharif University was and still is considered the most prestigious university in Iran even with its academic focus being on STEM programs (Shahbazi, 2009). Despite engineering graduates in general struggling with double digit unemployment rates (Alibaygi et al., 2013; Habibi, 2015), Sharif engineering graduates were not categorized in the same statistics. Sharif is considered the "MIT of Iran" and arguably the best university in Iran (Habibi, 1989; Matthews & Lord, 2017, p. 27). U.S. News & World Report (2021), for example, had Sharif University ranked 48th in the world in engineering research, and 127th in engineering overall. As a result of its international recognition, Sharif is partially excluded from certain sanctions that has left most Iranian universities isolated from the global academic community. For example, Sharif has a collaborative agreement with The University of California, Davis (Matthews & Lord, 2017). And with its domestic appeal, most STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) students aim to attend Sharif, even with a highly competitive and limited admissions process (Kamyab, 2008).

However, my experience and exploratory research shows that the success of Sharif graduates primarily coincided with them leaving Iran. These conflicting views that Iran's graduates struggle in the job market versus Sharif graduates' success stories inspired me to explore how

the lived experiences of Sharif graduates inside Iran would be described by these individuals. Moreover, if society believes Sharif's graduates have an increased likelihood in gaining employment inside Iran, then the moments of struggle, underemployment, mismatched expectations, unemployment, and disillusion for these graduates is compelling in potentially uncovering issues with the country's education system and job market that has yet to be identified. Also, if Sharif graduates' success stories do coincide with them leaving Iran then this aspect of their lived experiences could further highlight the limitations of human capital theory inside Iran and how Sharif graduates' job market expectations are possibly realistic when viewed beyond the borders of Iran.

Thus, my focus on inside Iran reveals findings that problematizes human capital theory. If I include the portions of my findings where the lived experiences of my five participants went beyond the borders of Iran then human capital theory would more accurately explain the participants' journey. Specifically, the theory's emphasis on personal responsibility for employment outcomes through investment in human capital (in the form of education) which presupposes individual agency within both the education system and the job market. Moreover, I believe the human capital perspective also proves problematic within the Iranian context due to the tense relationship between graduates and the educational institutions, governmental entities, and tentacles of the State that initially offered promises of returns on their human capital investments but eventually limited those returns within rigid State parameters.

In other words, the participants did not believe they could achieve their professional aspirations inside Iran because of their reported experiences, and often struggles with, certain obstacles throughout their life they felt were directly or indirectly imposed upon them by the institutions they navigated or other institutions around them. Beginning with the educational institutions they attended, from middle school to the schools for the gifted, high school to pre-university courses, as well as the Science Olympiad, *konkur* prep schools, and Sharif. Followed by the

participants time spent outside the educational environments and within society; this included ideological cultural, religious, and societal norms that were propagated by State-run media outlets, television, cinema, radio, print, online, and social media. Additionally, governmental and quasi-governmental entities of the State – such as mosques, policy makers, ministry departments, areas of the business sector, as well as the financial sector – furthered the rigid State parameters the participants felt confined within.

Two pivotal actors considered tentacles of the State that also further, and benefit from, the rigid State parameters are the *khodi* and *khusulati*. The literal translation of *khodi* is, 'of us' or 'us'. These are individuals with a connection to the State. This connection can be through – but not limited to – employment, family, marriage, association, or allegiances. With this connection, certain – but not limited to – social, economic, religious, political, financial, business, investment, and cultural concessions, privileges, advantages, and benefits are available to these individuals. As a member of the *khodi*, one upholds, advocates, and at times enforces the ideology of the *khodi* and the State (this ideology will be explained in Chapter 2. The Iranian context); which ensures their existential longevity, financial security, and power and influence over how the government operates and what direction the country is headed as it relates to all aspects of life. *Khusulati* is a type of company that is partially owned by the private sector and partially owned by the State or *khodi*. *Khusulati* companies have become another way – in addition to the monopolization of the religious, financial, and media sectors – that the *khodi* has monopolized the business sector and therefore the job market.

All of this is compounded by the people in the participants' life – i.e., some members of their family, friends, neighbors, cab drivers, store clerks, strangers, teachers, counselors, professors, co-workers, and bosses – who the participants felt were either (a) passively indifferent to alleviating these obstacles, tensions, and struggles, or (b) actively perpetuating them to where

the participants felt, and often times believed, there was only one specific pathway[2] they were to take, which they later called the one-dimensional path. The participants described how the tension with these institutions and the adults within them resulted in underdeveloped decisions for their short-term future and no decisions for their long-term future, thus leading to unrealized professional aspirations inside Iran. When we further explored how the participants' detailed their experiences with these tensions, obstacles, and parameters, they explained the feeling of being pushed on a one-dimensional path that shaped their aspirations for them. The participants used phrases such as "hitting a ceiling", "being stuck on a rail", "going down a track", or "forced down this road". The three findings chapters each represent a stage – pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation – of their lives that focus, in-depth, on their encounters, experiences, as well as perceived tensions, obstacles, and limitations with Iran's educational institutions, governmental entities, precarious job market, tentacles of the State, and the people in their lives.

The findings reveal that the participants were active in strengthening their weaknesses to improve their employability in order to increase their chances of realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran. They were also self-aware and able to articulate their own shortcomings while making pragmatic adjustments with their job market expectations. Thus, the participants' maturation led to them having a lot of agency despite being affected by the education system, job market, government, and State. Nevertheless, the participants reported how they eventually realized the difficulties and often impossibilities in achieving their own aspirations inside Iran.

[2] This specific pathway refers to: attending a school for the gifted → participate in the Science Olympiad → earn a top *konkur* ranking → enroll in a top-tier university like Sharif → graduate from Sharif (and enroll in a master's program and then a doctorate program) → complete your *sarbazi* → find any job, regardless of degree or interest → buy a house → get married → have kids → live 'a quiet life' and do not try to surpass the ceiling established by the *khodi* that places a cap on your level of influence on society.

1.3 Research question

I believe I was well placed to carry out this research because of my paradoxical experiences in both America and Iran. From living in Iran and working on Iran-related issues, I watched the country continue to descend into further uncertainty with its job market struggles, increasing inflation rates, high unemployment, and subsequent political and social unrest. On a personal level, I witnessed friends and family continue to struggle to make ends meet and try to provide a standard of living for their loved ones. I saw brothers steal from fathers and cousins steal from uncles. Being raised in America I maintained an unbiased and objective approach to such a sensitive, timely, and under-researched issue. Thus, I investigated the following research question: How have Sharif graduates' professional aspirations been shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences?

The main contribution of this study is the argument that a State or government such as the Islamic Republic of Iran – which has been debated as an authoritarian and oligarchical State (Azimi, 2009) – can reframe promises of human capital theory and employability to reduce its graduates to a one-dimensional aspiration that limits their standard of living within certain parameters irrespective of how much the participants invests in capitals, improves their employability, and strengthens and exercises their agency. This study is important because it suggests that a different way of thinking may be necessary in understanding the relationship between university graduates and the job market, as well as employability, aspirational attainment, and employment. Considering the context in which the current literature is debating these issues – vis-à-vis the intersection of higher education and the job market through a neo-liberal lens of agentic capital investments and employability while overlooking the complexities of the Iranian context within this debate – this study is crucial in moving this discourse forward by challenging some of the popular notions of a linear path towards job market successes, via human capital theory.

1.4 Outline of chapters

In chapter two I provide a brief historical overview of Iran in order to situate this study within the context of Iran. I first present a background of a nation that has consistently been in domestic and international turmoil since the 1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion during World War Two (Alizadeh, 2000). I then focus on the 1979 revolution and the subsequent events that changed the nation's social, cultural, political, educational, and economic landscape. I close the chapter with a synopsis of the Islamic Republic's most recent presidents and the direction the country steered as a result of each administration.

In chapter three I provide a review of the relevant scholarly work on professional aspirations and graduate employability. First, I review the literature on aspirations in four parts – inspired by the works of Spenner and Featherman (1978) – in order to understand this concept, see how it is measured, theorized, and what kind of relationship it has with an individual. I then examine the literature on employability through the works of Bourdieu (1972/1977), Brown (2011), and Tomlinson (2008). I also examine the literature on graduate unemployment in juxtaposition with the Iranian literature to highlight the role of the State and thus the gaps in the current literature where a deeper investigation into the role of the State may be necessary when discussing professional aspirations and graduate employability.

Chapter four, methodology, consists of nine sections. Section one is the research design where I explain the rationale for a biographical approach. In section two I discuss the research method and explain the reasoning for a purposive sampling of male, bachelor graduates, with a degree in engineering from Sharif University, in Tehran. I also detail the recruitment process in finding the participants that fit this criterion. In section three I profile the five participants and thirteen stakeholders. In section four I detail the four phases of data collection along with document collection. In section five, data analysis, I explain my approach in analyzing the data during

and after fieldwork and my rationale for employing translators. In sections six and seven I discuss the rigor of this research as well as my reflexivity and positionality. In section eight I discuss the ethical considerations of this study by examining my seven months in Tehran through Flinders' (1992) multi-framework approach. And in section nine I discuss the limitations of this study.

Chapter five is the first findings chapter titled, Pre-university: Creation of aspirations. I detail the process of aspiration formation as described by the participants through their lived experiences of growing up in Iran's school system, prior to entering Sharif University. The time frame of this pre-university stage is from their first year of middle school (or sixth grade when they are twelve years old) up until entering Sharif. These seven years consisted of the national entrance exam for the gifted, three years of middle school, the National Science Olympiad entrance exam, three years of high school, and one-year preparation, called pre-university, for the national higher education entrance exam or *konkur*. The participants' narration illustrates a temporal significance and a highly-centralized context where they experienced these aforementioned educational institutions as well as the people in their life (family members, friends, neighbors, community members, teachers, tutors, counselors, principals, and strangers) inducing, and often forcing, a short-sighted mentality where they felt their aspirations were being shaped for them, their individual agency was not developing, and they were being pushed down a one-dimensional pathway with promises of a guaranteed successful life. One key factor which also contributed to the participants' lives at that stage was the *khodi* that the participants felt impeded calls for change. Moreover, the participants reported how the State enabled such a culture to persist and strengthen by overlooking those impediments by the *khodi*.

In section one I explore the participants' account of how they felt Iran's school system was working against them when they tried to discover their aspirations and interests. A tension

appeared to exist in this relationship between the participants and the educational institutions. The findings reveal a school system centrally ran by the State and the participants having to follow a school curriculum that was disproportionately focused on teaching the State's ideology instead of offering a variety of classes or an academic environment to expand their minds to where the participants could discover their interests and explore their options. Instead, the participants reported how school and society minimized the importance of discovering their aspirations and interest while pushing them towards a one-dimensional pathway. This pathway consisted of a focus on short-term goals revolving around exams and studying with the reassurance that their future life would be guaranteed and successful. The participants described one aspect of the school system – the *konkur* – as a "monster", an "obstacle", or a "mythical being" that "needed to be conquered" in order to succeed. One influential factor within this tension was the *khodi*. The participants later realized the effects of this tension and one-dimensionality when they discovered how unprepared they felt for the future and the promises they were given did not coincide with their lived experiences.

In section two, I further detail the tension the participants' reported on how they felt the people around them not helping in either discovering their interests or determining what course of action to take regarding their academic trajectory to reach their aspirations. The participants described their experiences of an underdeveloped guidance infrastructure and a society that had an adverse effect on them feeling unsure about their plans and future while they continued to follow the one-dimensional path where their aspirations were being formed for them. Stakeholder accounts were incorporated in this section to further highlight the participants' experiences of feeling misguided and neglected. As a result, the participants reported a disposition of ignoring their future and aspirations, and "not knowing we could think about it" so they felt they could "only see what was in front of us". They also explained how "everyone wants you to be a certain way, follow a certain path". As the participants' descriptions became

increasingly definitive – using words such as only and everyone – I challenged them on their own faults. The participants acknowledged their shortcomings, but counterargued the highly-centralized context in which they grew up in that shaped their aspirations for them.

For section three I further examine the participants' perception of the one-dimensionality and how they felt their aspirations were being formed for them. Their narrative shows a culture of labelling students as stupid, lazy, sloppy, intelligent, or gifted. However, irrespective of their successes or failures, all the participants felt pushed towards the one-dimensional aspiration. They also described sacrificing their personal interests, areas of their social life, and other aspects of their youth due to the feeling of having to go through this one-dimensional pathway in order to reach that guaranteed and successful future they were promised. The participants described this journey as an unhealthy competition with a "wrong culture" in place. The participants' sense of agency while recounting their pre-university stage was recognizable in retrospect due to their adaptability and perseverance. However, the participants' agency was inconsequential during this stage because they were still following the one-dimensional pathway. Thus, while transitioning from their pre- to within-university, the participants recalled feeling unable to aspire for their own future. They also described a level of confusion in why this one-dimensional path was the pathway they must take and what professional purpose it may serve.

Chapter six is the second findings chapter titled, Within-university: Reinforced aspirations. In this chapter I detail the inflation of the one-dimensional aspiration as described by the participants and illustrate the highly-centralized context they felt working against them in trying to identify their own professional aspirations even while they tried to improve their employability in the process. The key factors in this second stage, according to the data, includes the higher education system and Sharif University. The time frame of this within-university stage is the participants' four years of undergrad at Sharif. The participants' within-

university time includes an additional year at Sharif where they prolonged their graduation in order to assess what course of action to take towards their future considering their own uncertainty, the volatility of the country's economy and job market, and the *sarbazi*, or mandatory military service, the participants were obligated – but did not want – to enlist in.

In section one I present my findings regarding the participants' perceived tension with the higher education system that they felt was working against them. I report on how I queried their views and tendencies of blaming societal norms and State expectations from educational institutions and governmental entities. I present the participants' narrative surrounding a concept that illustrated how the one-dimensional pathway continued to persist within university with the governmental entities enabling that persistence. This concept was *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi*. In short, the *khodi* constitutes any individual/entity who has any kind of affiliation, directly or indirectly, with the State – i.e., Sharif University, which is owned by the State. And the *ghayre-khodi* is everyone else – particularly the five participants. The participants described five experiences as a result of their tension with the *khodi*: (1) a sense of hopelessness towards Sharif's willingness or capability in helping *ghayre-khodi Sharifis*[3]; (2) the pressure to leave Iran at a time when they did not want to; (3) an inaction from the top-down and bottom-up for change; (4) misguidance from the people around them as the participants tried to navigate the parameters they felt were limiting their academic and professional maturation; and (5) a disconnect between Sharif and the job market.

As a result, the participants actively pursued their own aspirations. However, this pursuit created another tension as the participants realized their uncertainty in what their own professional aspirations were. In section two I detail how the participants' uncertainty about their future was compounded by their struggles to distance themselves from the one-

[3] Individuals with a current or prior affiliation to the University of Sharif either as a student or graduate.

dimensional pathway while simultaneously trying to identify their own aspirations and find ways to manifest their agency and employability to an extent where they have an increased likelihood in realizing their aspirations inside the limited parameters of Iran. In doing so, the participants changed their environment, pursued extracurricular activities, became multi-dimensional, worked on their employability, and became more self-critical. I close the chapter by briefly highlighting two issues – the *sarbazi* and the economy – that added to the participants' struggles in forming their own aspirations as well as the increased tension with the *khodi* as they transitioned into the job market.

Chapter seven is the third, and final, findings chapter, titled Post-graduation: Deflation of aspirations. In this chapter I detail the participants' accounts of the depreciation of the one-dimensional aspiration that had been pushed on them since pre-university due to the increasing obstacles they perceived within the job market. The actors at play in this third stage, according to the data, include the State and its tentacles of influence. Three discoveries occurred in this stage for the participants that led them feeling defeated, hopeless, or uncertain about their future inside Iran.

In section one I discuss the monopolizing of the job market by the *khodi*. According to the participants, this tension illustrates a highly-structured context that they believed denied them the realization of their professional aspirations inside Iran despite their continued efforts in improving their employability. What resulted for the participants was an unhealthy environment within the job market that left them with compromising decisions they were unwilling to make. The participants also reported a tension between trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran versus navigating the parameters of the job market that had limitations resulting from the *khodi*'s monopolization and the subsequent unhealthy environment. The participants and I also discussed their agency in face of these experiences and how they adapted and responded.

In section two I discuss how the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* tension became more of a tactile experience for the participants. They reported direct involvement by governmental entities and tentacles of the State in attempting to prevent their pursuits of trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. It is here where we first discover the ceiling at the end of the one-dimensional path that limited the participants' standard of living inside Iran. Moreover, the *khodi* were depicted as more active in their efforts to maintain the socially accepted norms of society that benefited the *khodi* while opposing efforts for change. The participants also experienced the *khodi*'s pursuit of *khusulati* companies that further monopolized the job market. *Khusulati* is a combination of private (***khusu****si*) and governmental (*do****lati***) entities, that primarily consists of current, former, and/or retired State/government officials, members of their family, friends, and/or associates, and some individuals with no ties to the State/government. Thus, the participants described a precarious and highly-structured job market, and social context that continued to push them towards the one-dimensional path while they continued to exert their agency within these parameters.

In section three I detail the participants' experiences of hitting the ceiling. For the participants, this experience took on many forms. One was the daily volatility that I briefly experienced with them, such as, internet black outs, overnight price increases, and confrontations with authorities. We expanded on these by further discussing what they were connected to: the economy and national security, both being tied to the State and, more specifically, the *khodi*. The participants explained how the denial for them in trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran led them to either lower their aspirations and accepting their state of affairs – which was understood as becoming an "obedient citizen" that continued to follow the one-dimensional pathway – or leave the country and increase their likelihood in realizing their aspirations – which reassured them that their job market expectations were realistic in a Western environment.

In chapter eight I present my key findings and the arguments of my thesis by unpacking the complex relationship between the participants and Iran's highly-centralized educational institutions, precarious job market, governmental entities, and tentacles of the State. In answering my research question – how have Sharif graduates' professional aspirations been shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences? – I first discuss the role of the State and its ceiling. Then I detail the effects of the State's one-dimensional pathway and subsequent tensions that my participants experienced and perceived. I close the chapter by discussing the limitations of employability and human capital theory within the Iranian context of an authoritarian regime. Particularly how the various tensions situate this study within the theoretical literature of human capital arguments by examining the works of Bourdieu (1972/1977), Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993), as well as Brown et al. (2011). Chapter nine concludes the thesis with suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2. The Iranian context

I must provide a little background for the reader to better understand the significance of the Iranian context in which the five participants were situated in. This research sits on the backdrop of a nation that has consistently been in domestic and international turmoil since the 1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion during World War Two (Alizadeh, 2000). Quickly followed by the British forced abdication of King Reza Shah that led to his son – Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – being placed on the throne (Kinzer, 2003). Then the 1951 Nationalization of Iran's oil from the British, led by Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (A. Milani, 2011). Soon followed by the 1953 coup by America's CIA and Britain's MI6 orchestrating the ouster of Mosaddegh, and once again a foreign nation putting Pahlavi back on the throne (Abrahamian, 2013). This event, along with the image of Pahlavi having to crown himself was seen by many Iranians as the end of his legitimacy (Abrahamian, 2013). In 1963, Pahlavi started the White Revolution aimed at modernizing Iran and Westernizing its people (Abrahamian, 2008). The next fifteen years saw policies that did help segments of the population through land reform and privatization of companies, but it also alienated, disenfranchised, and marginalized many groups who did not support such a Westoxification of their country (Al Ahmad et al., 1984).

The residual effects from these events culminated with the 1979 Revolution. From the multitude of groups opposing the monarchy – such as the Inteligencia, Marxists, Communists, Proletariat, and Theologians – it was the religious mullahs who gained control (M. Milani, 2018) and Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini whose opposition to the Shah since the White Revolution led to his ascent to power. Shortly after, the Islamic Republic was formed – which is a combination of a theocratic, authoritarian, and oligarchical State (Azimi, 2009) – and Khomeini became the Supreme Leader or *Velayat-e Faqih*. In 1980 Iraq invaded Iran hoping to weaken this new government but for the next eight years the war further helped the mullahs

solidify their control over the country through its use of nationalistic and religious zeal and propaganda. The structural makeup of the Islamic Republic and the country's new constitution developed out of Khomeini's religious and theocratic teachings – specifically his book *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist* (1970/2005). His claim that a country must be governed by Islamic law with a Supreme Leader to provide guardianship over its citizens laid the foundation for an ideologically driven government, society, and culture.

One area was the obedience of its citizens to the regime because it served as the executor of God's decrees. What developed as a result, and over the decades, was an educational curriculum from first grade through high education that was decided by the Supreme Leader of the country, and a forty-one-member council that he selected called the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (شورای عالی انقلاب فرهنگی; Hamdhaidari et al., 2008). In other words, neither Iran's Ministry of Education, nor the provincial or local governments had significant authority over the direction of their education system. The primary duties of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution was to ensure that the education and culture of Iran remain in accordance with Islamic teachings – or more specifically, the teachings of Twelver Shia Islam – as it was understood by the State. In Islam, there are two main denominations: Sunni and Shia. Then within Shia Islam, there are two main branches: Twelver and Ismaili. The difference is Twelver Shias follow the teachings of the Twelve Imams – who are believed to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Ismailis, on the other hand, follow the teachings of the first Six Imams. In Iran, Twelver Shia account for almost 90% of the Muslim population. Islam is the official religion of the country, Twelver Shia Islam is the religion of the State and a fundamental component of the State's ideology, and thus, the education system

As a result, there have been three classes every student must take throughout their sixteen years of education (twelve years of school and four years of bachelors) regardless of their religious beliefs or academic interest: Quranic studies, Islamic studies, and Arabic (Farsi, English, and

physical education are also mandatory). This ensured that every student grew up learning key aspects of the State's ideology. Furthermore, many classes within the humanities and social sciences (history, art, music, philosophy, politics, religion) were either tailored in accordance to the State's ideology or omitted from the curriculum. As Darius – one of my participants – explained, "it was very natural not to know what was taking place in [those subjects], and they kept us far away from everything at school, since those people control these places".

Another area of this guardianship was the anti-West and anti-American position in protecting its citizens from the Westoxification of their country. This agenda had driven the government's foreign and domestic policies. For the next forty years, a plethora of conflicts and crises strengthened the State's control over the country while its citizens' standard of living had slowly deteriorated (Khosravi, 2017). On the one hand, the nation had suffered from domestic problems: poor policy decisions, financial corruption, political nepotism, widening ideological gaps, social injustices, economic instability, very limited freedoms (of press, speech, and religion), human rights violations, and civil unrest (protests, demonstrations, and riots met with government crackdown; Barsamian, 2020). On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran was preoccupied with international conflicts: proxy wars against the United States in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; a (maritime) shadow war with Israel, as well as a proxy war against Israel through Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan; proxy wars against Saudi Arabia in Yemen (and somewhat in Pakistan and Bahrain); crippling sanctions due to its human rights violations and nuclear program, as well as cyber warfare (Barsamian, 2020).

Iran's tertiary education institutions date back to the nineteenth century, with its first university established in Tehran in 1934 (Khan & Wenk, 1974). Due to a series of foreign and domestic conflicts explained above, the nation struggled to develop its economy, job market, and education system for the majority of the twentieth century. By 1957, Iran had only three universities with fewer than 9,000 students (Kalb, 2017). In 1963, Pahlavi launched the "White

Revolution" aimed at modernizing and Westernizing the nation (Kalb, 2017). The next fifteen years saw some changes in areas such as land reform, increased oil revenue, and a modest growth in higher education to eight universities and 136,000 students (Khan & Wenk, 1974). However, as university applicants increased from 16,000 in 1961 to 235,000 by 1978, acceptance rate decreased from 36% to 12% (Boroujerdi, 1996, p. 38; Menashri, 1992, p. 207).

By 1979, the tertiary student population reached 176,000, accounting for 5% of the age group 18 to 29 (Bazargan, 2000, p. 173). Following the 1979 revolution, when the country changed from a monarchy to a theocracy, an eight-year war with Iraq (1980 to 1988) soon followed with the United States providing military support to Iraq (Alizadeh, 2000; Katzman, 2014). As a result of this, but also because of the new government's agenda, it closed all universities for four years in order to change text books, subject matter, curriculum, and faculty to be in alignment with the State's new ideology (Arani et al., 2018; Mahdi, 1999). This also included a substantial shift away from and alteration in the social sciences, humanities, literature, and history which Hamdhaidari et al. (2008) called the "Islamicisation" of the academic system. Thus, the 1980s became known as the lost decade where $40B US was spent fighting Iraq to the detriment of direct investment in domestic policies and social projects (Hunter, 1992).

As the government began to rebuild the nation, it was Iran's fourth president – Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989 to 1997) – who launched the reconstruction era to strengthen the economy through "expansive privatization, deregulation, and reduction of subsidies, which weakened collective contracts, increased the class gap, and caused the loss of job security" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 62). Such policies transformed the country from a welfare State to a quasi-socialist and free-market State, leading to a rise in cost of living and unprotected workers (Bahramitash, 2003). Additionally, uncertainty and instability of the nation's economy and job market continued, while the citizenry under thirty increased to account for two-thirds of the total population (Bayat, 2009), further exacerbating the country's unemployment problem. The

average growth rate of public (free) universities from 1989 to 1997 was 9.8%, compared to 20.8% for private (paid) universities (*Daneshgah Azad Islami*; Bayat, 2009, p. 174). The establishment and rapid growth of private universities was seen as a lucrative business by the State, but also a way to widen access to higher education since public universities only accepted 10% of their applicants each year (Department of Statistics & Information Technology, 2017; Hamdhaidari et al., 2008; Kalb, 2017; Kamyab, 2008; Sakurai, 2004). This upsurge in enrollment was three-fold: (1) societal significance placed on the prestige of higher education; (2) student enrollment rates increasing at a faster pace than the country's population; and (3) the rapid expansion of private and semi-public universities[4] (Hamdhaidari et al., 2008). This rapid growth of higher education institutions and enrollment rates coincided with President Rafsanjani's mission in widening access irrespective of one's age, gender, class, and hometown (Hamdhaidari et al., 2008).

With a reformist-moderate entering office the following year, Iran's new president – Mohammad Khatami (in office from 1997 to 2005) – shouldered a great responsibility in trying to improve the economy and increase job growth, especially for the youth. Where Rafsanjani had the reconstruction era, Khatami's approach was dawned the dialogue among civilizations in attempts to thaw relations with America through means other than politics. By 2000, private universities had over 130 campuses nationwide (Hamdhaidari et al., 2008). The total number of enrolled students by that same year reached 1.3M (Bayat, 2009). By 2001, 61% of all admitted students into universities were women (Bahramitash & Esfahani 2011). The pressure on Khatami's government to create job growth for these soon-to-be graduates led his administration towards unconventional and difficult initiatives. Between 2001 to 2003, over

4 Semi-public universities are: (1) *Payame Noor* (distance learning universities), (2) *Ghayre Entifayi* (specialized universities), (3) *Fani-herfayi* (two-year technical colleges), (4) *Pardis Benulmilal* (international university), (5) *Daneshgah Shabaneh* (night school, which despite the name is considered a university and is typically for mature adults and/or professionals), (6) vocational colleges, and (7) junior colleges (Al-Agha et al., 2009; Clark, 2017; Habibi, 2015; Hassani & Mir Ghasemi, 2016).

one thousand startup non-governmental organizations were able to register throughout the country – an endeavor difficult to accomplish since the Islamic Republic viewed most NGOs as a threat to the regime (Bayat, 2009). Furthermore, a joint vocational project with Germany, Italy, and Belgium was also established to better prepare half a million Iranians entering the job market (Hamdhaidari et al., 2008). By the end of his second term – specifically from 2001 to 2006 – job growth increased by 700,000 (Habibi, 2015, p. 2). However, youth unemployment remained in double digits (Bayat, 2009).

Khatami's successor – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005 to 2013) – had a more conservative agenda, thus reversing many of his predecessor's work (Amuzegar, 2007; Bahramitash, 2013). Many media outlets and NGOs were banned or shutdown. Women were prohibited from majoring in seventy-seven academic fields across thirty-six universities at the graduate level (Khosravi, 2017). The country's nuclear program resumed operations, which led to further sanctions. Job growth by 2011 was only 20,000 greater than in 2006 (Habibi, 2015). Graduate unemployment remained in double digits at 19% overall and 40% in Tehran alone (Arani et al., 2018). Ahmadinejad's government responded by altering the definition of employment to an "individual who works at least one hour per week" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 75). He also increased access to State distance-learning universities (*Payām-e Nur*) without requiring the national entrance exam (*konkur*; Arani et al., 2018). This was promoted as a "direct competitor to the rapidly growing private universities" (Kalb, 2017, p. 12). However, this was seen more as a business opportunity rather than a policy shift in helping graduate unemployment. Over time, distance-learning universities had played an important role in extending State education, making up almost 30% of Iran's total State university enrolment in 2014 (Kalb, 2017). However, this added to the already 270,000 graduates every year entering the job market which further complicated the nation's unemployment problem (Azizi & Hosseini, 2006, as cited in Alibaygi et al., 2013). In the span of these eight years, Iran's economy continued to worsen

due to increased inflation, corruption, and sanctions coupled with decreased foreign investment and job growth. Simultaneously, unemployment remained in double digits as it had been since 2000: 12% overall and almost 27% for young people (Khosravi, 2017). In some major cities, such as Tehran, youth unemployment was upwards of 40% (Khosravi, 2017).

Iran's next president – Hassan Rouhani (2013 to 2021) – reversed some of his predecessor's policies and primarily focused on sanctions relief through a nuclear agreement to help the country's economy. In 2014, the Minister of Labor and Social Security warned that approximately four million graduates would enter the job market in the next few years further complicating the countries unemployment problem (Habibi, 2015). Moreover, due to the continued sanctions, the country's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, implored his citizens to endure this hardship through what he called "resistance economy" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 11). Parallel to this, President Rouhani's foreign affairs ministry worked with their counterparts from the United States, China, Russia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the European Union to reach an agreement on curbing Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief and foreign investments. By 2015 they came to an agreement called the JCPOA, or joint comprehensive plan of action. However, for the next three years Iran's youth saw minimal improvements in their living standards and employment opportunities. By 2018, U.S. President Trump backed out of the JCPOA and reimposed the sanctions that were lifted in 2015 and imposed additional sanctions for the next four years – in what the White House called a maximum pressure campaign. After eight years Rouhani's presidency had very little to show in regard to an improved job market for not only its graduates but all its citizens. Furthermore, with the COVID-19 pandemic, sanctions fully in place, unemployment rates remaining high, the economy remaining weak, and the citizenry increasingly frustrated with their government's poor handling of domestic issues (Fahim, 2021) had left Iran's new

president – Ebrahim Raisi, who took office in August 2021 – with a considerable number of issues to attend to.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

Thus, considering the context in which my research question[5] is being asked, a literature review on professional aspirations, graduate employability, and graduate unemployment will be discussed in this chapter. The necessity of such a review is due to the role of the State and the subsequent uncertainties of Iran's job market that graduates must navigate while trying to enhance their employability and avoid unemployment in order to try to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. In other words, the way we look at the effectiveness of one's employability and the causes of unemployment in an Iranian context may suggest an added element or actor when examining these terms in the wider literature by also including the role of the State in an adversarial capacity. A graduate's experience in Iran's job market, and the possibility of experiencing unemployment, requires an assessment of the State and its tentacles of influence that limit the parameters in which a graduate can navigate in order to succeed in the job market and attain their professional aspirations.

Similar to Brown et al.'s (2011) argument of broken promises of human capital theory through globalization, there may also be broken promises in the way the State guarantees a successful life for the youth but eventually limits job market returns in accordance to State expectations and job market stipulations. Therefore, if a graduate becomes unemployed the problems may go beyond economic and political factors that current literature discuss. There may also be a sociological and ideological component, i.e., an us versus others tension, or the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi*. Thus, the ineffectiveness of one's employability and the possibility of unemployment due to potential State-related factors was important to include in this study when examining the lived experiences and aspirations of graduates who navigate an uncertain

[5] How have Sharif graduates' professional aspirations been shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences?

Iranian job market. Therefore, I begin this chapter by reviewing the literature on professional aspirations, then I move on to graduate employability and graduate unemployment.

3.1 Professional aspirations

The literature on aspiration has been discussed across many disciplinary approaches, each employing different terminologies, measures, theories, and concepts. I will take on a sociological approach in conceptualizing aspiration within this study. Inspired by Spenner and Featherman's (1978) four variations of aspiration, this section is divided into four parts. First is aspirations "in objects" – such as education, occupation, and material well-being (Spenner & Featherman, 1978, p. 376) – to identify terminologies and define aspiration within the context of this study. Second, aspirations "in time" – such as age and duration of aspirations (Spenner & Featherman, 1978, p. 376) – to identify measures of aspiration. Here, I will discuss the works of Mains (2012) and Pettit (2017). Third is explained as "the way in which subjective probability and valence are conceptualized" – vis-a-vis how important, realistic, feasible, and attainable the aspiration is (Spenner & Featherman, 1978, p. 376). Here, theoretical ideas will be briefly discussed. Fourth is the procedural relationship between the individual and their aspirations – i.e., their level of desire, inclination, hope, and willingness to work for/towards their aspiration (Spenner & Featherman, 1978, p. 376). Appadurai's (2013) capacity to aspire will be discussed here.

The first variation lends itself to the multitude of terms and definitions of aspiration. Reissman (1953, as cited in Spenner & Featherman, 1978, p. 376) and Kahl (1953, as cited in Spenner & Featherman, 1978, p. 376) define aspiration as "one's level of willingness to change to a higher prestige job, or one's desire and expectation for college attendance". There are also variational terms such as educational aspiration (e.g., Sewell et al., 1957), career or occupational aspiration (e.g., Haller & Miller, 1971), and mobility aspiration (e.g., Van Zeyl, 1974). The literature has

shown that students with high aspirations set loftier goals (Hodis et al., 2015; Trice & McClellan, 1993), have increased motivation towards those goals (Mahoney et al., 2003; McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2010), and are future-oriented with clear plans and a directed focus (Nurmi, 2004). However, what happens when professional aspirations are not achieved? What are the individual's lived experiences, perceptions, hopes, and frustrations, as a result? This thesis defines professional aspiration as an individual's ideas of their possible selves, what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become (Haas, 1992; Markus & Nurius, 1986), their "wants, preferences, choices, and calculations" as Appadurai (2013, p. 187) explains it.

The second variation lends itself to the measures of aspiration. One example is personal initiative, defined as "an individual taking an active and self-starting approach to work goals and tasks and persisting in overcoming barriers and setbacks" (Fay & Frese, 2001). Another approach is the extracurricular activities – such as sports, music, social and academic clubs, volunteering – an individual engages in to promote and set their personal goals, evaluate what is needed to attain them, and actively acquire the abilities and resources to achieve them (Larson et al., 2006; Seow & Pan, 2014). There is also one's level of achievement motivation towards those goals they want to reach (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016; Lens et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Lewin et al. (1944, p. 335) discusses one's level of aspiration, which he defines as "the level of future performance in a familiar task which an individual, knowing their level of past performance in that task, explicitly undertakes to reach". Similarly, Bourdieu (1972/1977, 1990, 1997/2000) offers a deterministic approach based on an individual's habitus or subjective expectations and their objective probability of attaining their goal(s) or future. He argues that one's aspiration is in line with the chances of reaching them it is unlikely one will aspire for certain things they believe they cannot attain. Therefore, measuring aspiration is based on disposition, class, social-status, gender. These approaches discuss how an individual's

aspiration develops and fluctuates, influences what goals they pick, and their likelihood in achieving their aspirations. However, what happens to the individual if after their personal initiative, extracurricular activities, motivation, past performances, and/or their class/social-status, still results in unfulfilled professional aspirations?

This study will reside in this experience of unrealized professional aspirations and draw inspiration from the works of Mains (2012) and Pettit (2017). For example, Mains (pp. 3–4) looks at young Ethiopian men whose "aspirations for the future" do not fit "with economic realities" and what happens when they are "unable to attain their desires for the future". He describes a social dynamic among these men where particular social engagements, rituals, and customs are more valuable and honorable than working "low-status" jobs. Moreover, they remain unemployed, living with their parents, unable to marry and start a family, possessing these "unprecedented aspirations" and "elevated ambitions" (Mains, 2012 p. 3). However, they continue to hold on to this hope that one day they will attain the job they want inside Ethiopia. Mains (2012, p. 43) argues that one's aspirations can persist despite these conditions as long as the individual retains the "ability to continually imagine a desirable future" which will enable hope to persist.

Pettit goes one step further and presents a group of young Egyptian men who are on the brink of losing hope. I draw on Pettit's work of how these men continue to manage their employability while clenching to this hope that eventually they will reach their professional aspirations inside Egypt. Pettit (2017, p. 283) portrays his participants as attempting "to make the transition from education to 'aspired to' employment". These areas of enquiry from Mains and Pettit are the experiences where this study aims to reside. Exploring the moments of the participants' lived experiences and seeing how and why they feel unable to attain their desired future inside Iran. What explanation can be discovered if my participants acknowledge their unprecedented aspirations or mismatched expectations, and make adjustments or lower their

aspirations, but continue to experience or feel that their professional aspirations inside Iran are unrealizable?

The third variation lends itself to theories that discuss the ways "in which subjective probability and valence are conceptualized". For example, goal-setting theory argues that setting goals and being goal-oriented leads to an increased likelihood of attaining aspirations (Forster & Souvignier, 2014; Locke & Latham, 2006; Schunk, 2001). Social cognitive career theory, on the other hand, looks at self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and goals. These two theories have been argued as (a) "essential agency variables that enable individuals to develop personal control over their career development" (Sawitri et al., 2014, p. 562), and (b) explain the influence aspiration has in driving motivation and future goals (Ingram, 2017; Lent et al., 1994; Locke & Latham, 1990). However, I find them limited in explaining professional aspirations within the Iranian context. The limitations in these theories' explanation is also seen in those moments where Pettit (2017) and Mains (2012) describe their participants' repeated attempts of setting goals and staying motivated but subsequently failing to achieve their aspirations, and in its place hope and frustration exist.

The fourth variation lends itself to the procedural relationship between the individual and their aspiration – specifically looking at Appadurai's (2013) capacity to aspire. For Appadurai (2013, p. 189), the capacity to aspire is a navigational one consisting "of a dense combination of nodes and pathways". Individuals who are less fortunate have fewer "aspirational nodes and thinner/weaker pathways" that are "less strategically valuable" for them (p. 189). He goes on to argue that the remedy "requires strengthening among communities" (p. 190). The example he gives is of a community in Mumbai, India who united its efforts to "build a large number of community toilets on a scale previously reserved for private contracts and developers, or for government organizations and experts" (pp. 190–191). Thus, for Appadurai, aspirations are never simply individual, they are formed in interaction and in the thick of social life (p. 187).

Where Appadurai argues of a collective effort from the marginalized community to increase/expand their capacity to aspire, Mains (2012) and Pettit (2017) conceptualize this premise from an individual approach while still presenting the thick of social life within the Egyptian and Ethiopian context. Mains explains a social network of unemployed young men whose interactions, relationships, and activities are dictated by a strong sense of *yilunnta* (honor). Pettit writes about his participants going through the motions of job hunting while clinging to hope and seeing themselves as *mukafeh* (strugglers).

This study also takes an individual approach within the thick social life of Iran, but from a different perspective. The participants of this study are considered, by Appadurai, to be more privileged because they attended a top-tier university (Sharif University) and earned a prestigious degree in the field of engineering. Thus, their nodes and pathways should be more strategically valuable which should mean more opportunities and achievable aspirations. However, what if that is not the case when focusing on the participants' lived experiences inside Iran? It can be argued that the participants have strategically valuable nodes and pathways, however this study will show that these nodes and pathways are strategically valuable when the participants decide to leave Iran. What explanation can be discovered if the nodes and pathways are more strategically valuable to a different demographic other than graduates from an elite university such as Sharif?

3.2 Graduate employability

Further to a graduate's attempts in attaining professional aspirations vis-à-vis finding employment through the State expectations and job market limitations, an examination of graduate employability is also important. Bourdieu's (1972/1977, 1990) work on habitus and capital, has been influential on the discourse on employability and one's ability to realize their professional aspirations. Bourdieu (1972/1977) argues that an individual's aspirations are in line with their chances of realizing those aspirations, and if that realization is unlikely to occur

they will not aspire for certain things he/she believes is unattainable. Bourdieu (1972/1977) goes on to explain that the individual knows which aspirations are realizable – and therefore, worth acting on – due to a historical-structuralist understanding where the individual continuously experiences, unconsciously acquires, and internalizes a set of dispositions from their surrounding structures. Thus, the individual's relationship with their surrounding structures is recursive and arguably subordinate to those structures. Ahearn (2001, p. 118) explains how this interaction is "a generative process that produces practices and representations that are conditioned by the structuring structures from which they emerge".

Giddens (1984) goes further than Bourdieu (1972/1977) – with structuration theory – in his understanding of this recursive relationship between structure and agency by moving away from, what he calls, a dualism of structure-agency into a mutually interacting duality where structure and agency have a collaborative relationship. He explains how structure plays the dual role of the "medium and the outcome of the social practices they recursively organize" (p. 25). In other words, the individual's actions are shaped in a constraining and enabling way by the very social structures that his/her actions create and serve to reinforce (Ahearn, 2001). Thus, Giddens claims that this duality provides more space for the agent to affect change through reflexivity (Giddens, 1984). However, along with Bourdieu, Giddens was also criticized for being deterministic and seeing agency as "so tightly bound to structure that one loses sight of the different ways in which agency actually shapes social action" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963).

Thus, Bourdieu-inspired or Giddens-inspired views illustrate that although the individual is able to navigate the job market by using their capitals and employability to aid them in realizing their professional aspirations, the aspirations they are pursuing, through their manifestation of their employability and capitals, has been influentially constructed by their surrounding structures. These views – where employability is debated through an agentic understanding

that is influenced by a structuralist framework – may be a less problematic argument when trying to explain a graduate's experience inside a country with a developed democracy – like most Western nations – or a country where the State/government is relatively more fluid and open to change – like Egypt (Pettit, 2017) – and with fewer limitations on their graduates' ability to manifest their employability and capitals to an extent where their professional aspirations have an increased likelihood in being realized inside their own country. However, this paradigm has been criticized for being deterministic and disproportionately leaning towards structure over agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

One of Giddens' main critics, for example, argues that the conflation of structure and agency elides the possibility of identifying "the properties and powers pertaining respectively to structure and to agents" (Archer, 2007, p. 34). Therefore, scholars have also argued more on agency and globalization in employability enhancements and aspirational attainment that is not necessarily bound within the borders of one's country or within the parameters of one's government. For example – and with criticism on Bourdieu's work – Sewell (1992) argues how the individual is the master of their own future and capable in shaping their own history, and Beck (1992) argues how the individual has complete control of their life due partly to international mobility.

Moreover, the current discourse on employability argues that it is incumbent on the individual (Baruch, 2001; Garavan, 1999) to be able to "move self-sufficiently" within the job market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 2) find ways to enhance their attractiveness within that job market (Iles et al., 1996), as well as "anticipate changes in tasks and work environment and react to these changes in a proactive way" (Sanders & de Grip, 2004, p. 76), and/or exercise an "active adaptability that enables them to identify and realize job opportunities" (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 16). These debates have a continued focus on the individual, maintaining that one's employability derives from the different capitals one can invest in, such as human, cultural,

personal, reputational, and/or social (Tholen, 2017). Additionally, scholars have debated on how an individual can move self-sufficiently, find ways to enhance their attractiveness, anticipate change, and be adaptable. For example, capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2013), achievement motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), personal initiative (Fay & Frese, 2001), hope (Valero et al., 2015), goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2006), social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994), parental influence (Agarwala, 2008; Lareau, 2003), extracurricular activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hansen & Larson, 2007), human capital theory (Becker, 1993), and positional conflict (Brown et al., 2011).

This agentic understanding of employability through an individualist framework offers viable explanations on why and how an individual can improve their employability. However, this framework may be a less problematic argument when examined from two vantage points. First, if the individual is able, and wanting, to geographically move domestically and/or internationally to realize their aspirations. Second, and similar to the structuralist framework, if the individual is from a developed democracy or a country where the State/government is relatively more fluid, open to change – like Ethiopia (Mains, 2012) – and with fewer limitations on their graduates' ability to manifest their employability and capitals to an extent where their professional aspirations have an increased likelihood in being realized. Therefore, if such conditions are not applicable within such a framework then an alternative explanation is required to try to understand a graduate's lived experiences when trying to enact one's employability.

Thus, there appears to be a limitation with a structuralist or an individualist approach in assessing the effectiveness of one's employability when examined within the Iranian context. As these arguments are presented within a Western-centered context – by which the agentic and linear understanding of employability and job market returns is viewed and understood – it does not thoroughly take into consideration the role of an authoritarian State that may be

comparatively less fluid and less open to change. Consideration must be made for the role of a rigid State in an adversarial capacity to where a tense relationship may develop (and exist) between the individual and the State, as well as the institutions and entities that are influenced and controlled by the State. Moreover, not only is there a level of inflexibility by the State to not be open to change, but there may also be an active resistance to, and prevention of, change out of fear of an existential threat to the State's control and power. Thus, this study moves away from, and challenges, such Western understandings of employability and linear conceptualizations of job market returns through education and examines graduate employability through a subjective understanding by drawing upon the works of Tomlinson (2007, 2008, 2012).

One aspect is Tomlinson's (2008, p. 59) argument on the limitations in the capital theories/framework, where he contends that "students understand their future job market outcomes as being more complex than simply possessing extra credentials and technical knowledge from higher education". Similarly, criticism has been made (Brown et al., 2011) against the leading thinkers on capital theories (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961). For example, human capital theory's argument that an individual's investment in oneself through "education […] internal migration [and] the use of leisure time to improve skills and knowledge" leads to job market success and "impressive rise in the real earnings per worker" (Schultz, 1961, p. 4). Based on this assertion within the Iranian context, the argument can be made that graduates have yet to see job market success, rise in earnings, and other positive results materializing inside Iran from their investments.

Although employability can be viewed from an organizational or public policy perspective, this study will focus on the individual viewpoint. In developing this further, McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) framework of a holistic approach is also adopted. They emphasize an examination of external factors, personal circumstances, and individual factors. The first two

were discussed in Chapter 2: The Iranian context with external factors consisting of the events and governmental entities that shaped Iranian society, culture, religion, and politics which then shaped the country's education system, job market, economy, and policies. The personal circumstances were the environments that developed out of these external factors in which the individual grew up in, navigated, and had (or did not have) access to.

The individual factors of skills, competencies, attributes, and abilities that McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) highlight is where Tomlinson's (2007, 2008, 2012) subjective notion of employability comes in. Many scholars have recognized the significance in the subjective nature of the individual experience of employability and the historical, economic, and social context surrounding one's journey (Estienne, 1997; Holmes, 2001; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Tholen, 2017). They have also recognized the difficulty in defining employability and explaining how it should be maintained (Clarke, 2008; Harvey, 2001; Rajan et al., 2000). Tomlinson (2007, p. 287) argues that "employability should be conceptualized as a form of identity; it is relational, emergent and influenced largely by graduates' lived experience of the job market". Furthermore, Tomlinson (2007, p. 286) stresses the significance of the subjective and contextual elements, criticizing the current discourse from "continually overlooking the subjective dimension of employability […], how it relates to the way individuals come to perceive and understand the job market [and] the types of dispositions, attitudes, and identities they develop around their future work and employability". This study, therefore, will explore how the participants construct, understand, and manage their employability throughout their journey of trying to explore, identify, and realize their professional aspirations inside Iran while faced with the uncertainties, struggles, and barriers in achieving them in a highly-centralized education system and precarious job market that are controlled and/or influenced by an authoritarian State.

3.3 Graduate unemployment

Literature on Iran's graduate unemployment can be categorized into two perspectives. The first comes from Western and diasporic analysts who, in most instances, have examined and debated this issue through the lens of a corrupt government that has caused the country's international isolation, crippling sanctions, political nepotism, financial corruption, economic instability, and inflationary pressures. These conversations (e.g., Khosravi, 2008; Mahdavi, 2009; Varzi, 2006; Yaghmaian, 2002) bear compelling arguments, however, they have been criticized for a homogeneous interpretation of complex issues (Olszewska, 2013). Olszewska (2013, p. 844) further criticizes this perspective of Iran as "the existence of a unitary society positioned in irreconcilable opposition to a monolithic State [where] there is little accounting for diversity and hierarchies [and] the assumption is that there is a single fault line of struggle in society". Khosravi (2017), for example, acknowledges in his later work that a strong tendency towards a politically oriented narrative exists in the literature. Similarly, Shervin Malekzadeh (2016, p. 866) describes his moment of clarity regarding the aforementioned during his fieldwork:

> I had overcompensated in favor of an idealized vision of agency, thus reproducing the resistance/domination dynamic already found in much of the existing literature. I had done so because I was looking for dramatic or expressed bursts of opposition or bouts of justice seeking under authoritarian rule, rather than seeking out how people negotiate with what can be a suffocatingly tedious and impenetrable bureaucratic setting in order to improve their own lives.

The second perspective comes from local scholars who have mostly examined Iran's graduate unemployment problem though a quantitative lens (Amini et al. 2013; Hashemi et al., 2012; Naji et al. 2016; Sakurai, 2004). Abbas Bazargan is arguably the leading thinker in Iran on the country's education system, and his publications span over five decades and two regimes. Bazargan's work on higher education mainly focuses on institutional performance, evaluation schemes, quality satisfaction ratings, internal evaluations, and access to education. His 2000 article points to a number of shortcomings in the higher education system that he argues has

led to graduate unemployment. For example, the inflexibility of higher education institutions to quickly react to the job market. Bazargan (2000, p. 176) goes on to admit that further research on this issue is needed, "follow-up studies on university graduates are needed to show the current trends of graduate unemployment".

Alashloo et al. (2005, p. 132) conducted a structured questionnaire "to identify the impeders of strategy implementation in the higher education sector of Iran". They identify thirty-two impeders. Some of which are mentioned in Bazargan's (2000) article five years earlier. For example, lack of adequate internal communication, unsuitable training systems, and competition rather than cooperation between people and departments (Alashloo et al., 2005, p. 141). Alashloo et al. also echoes a similar sentiment to that of Bazargan regarding the dearth of qualitative work on Iran's higher education system. In 2011, Mojgan et al. published an article discussing the anxiety undergraduate students have with career indecision. This is a quantitative approach employing the career decision scale and the state and trait anxiety inventory on 150 students. This study reveals "a strong positive correlation between state and trait anxiety with career indecision" (Mojgan et al., 2011, p. 33). Also, Mojgan et al. concludes that "it would be beneficial to explore the possible sources of anxiety in either individual or group counseling sessions" with "further research […] to investigate the influence of other factors on career indecision" (p. 33). Alibaygi et al. (2013, p. 680) conducted a quantitative study looking at the skill-mismatch phenomenon where they concluded that not only was there a worrying and significant mismatch but also "the employability of students be further investigated utilizing qualitative methodologies". Thus, after at least thirteen years of local scholars' calling for a qualitative assessment of their country's graduate unemployment problem, there still seems to be a void in this literature.

There are also debates highlighting the graduates' perspective of graduate unemployment. For example, on a macroscale, Habibi (2015) linking the country's unemployment crisis with a

rapid expansion of universities that led to an influx of overqualified graduates reluctantly competing for low-skilled or unskilled jobs. Habibi roots the problems of this massification in a shift away from Iran's domestic policies of further higher education and job market reforms towards a focus on foreign policies for national security. More specifically, regional conflicts throughout the Middle East, and nuclear program disputes with the United States that have led to economic sanctions. On a microscale, Naji et al.'s (2016) research on employment outcomes for 200 nursing graduates from a university in Isfahan found that 16.5% were unemployed. Of those thirty-three individuals, twenty have family concerns (spouse disapproved, wanting children, too much time away from family), four complained of lack of job opportunities, and nine are no longer interested in nursing. However, a deeper investigation was not performed to uncover more about these individuals' experiences. For example, for the nine nursing graduates, perhaps there was a mismatch between their expectations of their profession and the actual work associated with nursing.

These aforementioned debates around the causes and factors of unemployment for Iran's graduates is similar to the global conversation. Discussions on the different types of job market mismatches, for example, have been debated within political and economic arenas where issues like a mismatch between supply and demand (Liagouras et al., 2003), a disconnect between knowledge and skills (Dabalen et al., 2001), geographic mismatch (Barker, 2007), mismatched expectations (Mains, 2012), as well as vertical and horizontal mismatch (ILO, 2013) have been examined. Iran also joins the wider conversation on socio-economic concerns (Denny & Harmon, 2000; Granovetter, 1995; Livanos, 2010), (rapid) growth of higher education (Bai, 2006), a surplus of graduates into the job market (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004), and societal influences on career choice (e.g., Hoffman, 1974; Jackson et al., 1993; Lent & Brown, 1996). As scholars argue which cause or factor is more impactful on unemployment, their lack of consensus highlights Bee and Dolton's (1990, p. 32) argument that "unemployment trends are

derived from a complex interaction of forces, and it is difficult to identify the individual impact". This argument by Bee and Dolton was true when the global conversation on graduate unemployment reached more complex debates from the 2008 recession (Livanos, 2010; Oreopoulos et al., 2012; Tomic, 2014), as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Bee and Dolton's argument is also true within the Iranian context.

Not only has Iran endured the complexities of the Great Recession and COVID-19, but the country has continuously struggles with the complexities of unemployment since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Since 1980 Iran has been under international sanctions primarily by the United States, and often by the European Union and the United Nations (Amuzegar, 2004; Hamdhaidari et al., 2008; Kousha & Abdoli, 2004). Moreover, considering the aforementioned points about Iran's history in Chapter 2, it can be argued that unemployment in Iran has been – and continues to be – structural, as it is explained by Barker.

> Structural Unemployment – "generally refers to the overall inability of the economy to provide employment for the total labor force even at the peak of the business cycle. Job opportunities do not increase fast enough to absorb those already unemployed and those newly entering the job market." Some examples of this inability can be "the rapid growth of the labor force, the use of capital- or skills-intensive technology, an inflexible job market, skills mismatch, and geographic mismatch" (Barker, 2007, p. 177).

However, based on local literature, the structural unemployment of Iran appears even more complex due to the role of the State. For example, where Iranian academics and analysts have offered ideas and recommendations to help advance higher education reform and possibly reduce graduate unemployment, these appear to have met the impenetrable bureaucratic setting that Malekzadeh (2016) explained above, as well as the inflexible job market stated above by Barker (2007). There is little evidence to show that the policy proposals have been ratified, and/or implemented (Ansari et al., 2008; Mirzaei, 2019; Seif, 2020). For example, Bazargan has been writing on the importance of quality assessment, quality assurance, internal evaluations, and external evaluations in Iran's higher education system since 1999. The

problems he identified continue to exist and some of his recommendations that were seriously considered remain in their pilot phase (Farasatkhah et al., 2008). As a result, this complexity brings to the fore an additional cause and factor to unemployment that has yet to be deeply examined in the greater literature: the role of the State in an adversarial capacity.

Thus, the dichotomy between a monolithic geo/sociopolitical analysis from a Western and diasporic view, and an operational and economic assessment by local scholars has left a void in the literature where an in-depth perspective of the individual lived experience is virtually unknown. Furthermore, while local studies have contributed to the literature on Iran's higher education system and job market, they have also come up short in providing a thorough insight into the lived experiences of individuals' perceived tense relationship with, and navigation through, Iran's highly-centralized educational institutions, governmental entities, precarious job market, tentacles of the State, and the people in their lives. These are areas where this study fills the gaps in the literature. This study also diverts from offering recommendations – policy or otherwise – to remedy these issues, and rather raises further problems with how we investigate, examine, and understand professional aspirational attainment, the effectiveness of graduate employability, and subsequently, graduate unemployment.

Chapter 4. Methodology

It is within these limitations, and tensions between my participants and their education system, precarious job market, governmental entities, and tentacles of the State, that this study aimed at investigating how Sharif graduates' professional aspirations were shaped by their lived experiences through pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation. Furthermore, this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding into the participants' experiences through Iran's school system, higher education system, and job market. To achieve this, the study drew on a biographical design, which has been argued by scholars as a useful method in uncovering the details of one's everyday life experiences through storytelling (Bron & Thunborg, 2015; Burke, 2014). The study focused on five participants with four rounds of in-depth narrative interviews – as a narrative approach is recommended by the literature (Ricoeur, 1980; Wengraf, 2001). Other sources of evidence were also collected – local documents and stakeholder interviews – as is also suggested by the literature (Denzin, 1989; Erben, 1998) for contextual, evidentiary, and accuracy purposes.

The empirical component of this research started as an exploratory study in Iran from 2 December 2017 to 13 January 2018. The initial aim was to explore what issues were of significance to university students, bachelor graduates, professors, and professionals regarding – but not limited to – graduate unemployment, employability, and the job market. Simultaneously, I juxtaposed those with my own assumptions to identify the key issues that revealed the need for further investigation. During the six weeks, a 14-participant questionnaire was conducted along with a series of in-depth interviews. I visited four cities (see Figure 1 below); nine universities (eight public, one private); seventeen professors ranging from economics and psychology to engineering and education; fourteen professionals from the academic, private, and public sectors, including a Ministry Office; eight graduates and nine students.

The findings from the initial study narrowed the field of study from four cities and eight universities to one university in Tehran. It also challenged my initial assumptions that graduate unemployment stemmed from a student's lack of autonomy – vis-à-vis the *konkur* (Iran's national entrance exam into higher education) – in choosing and/or changing their major/university, which then led to bachelor graduates entering the job market with a discipline they had very limited interest in pursuing professionally. Then, because of the cultural norms and societal pressures, of *aberu* (honor/reputation) and masculinity, they would/could not accept any job offer. For instance, a job that would be considered low status. In short, the exploratory study helped form the context and methodology of this thesis primarily because the more I interviewed and conversed with individuals the more I realized the inaccuracies of my own assumptions as well as the complexities and tensions that existed for bachelor graduates.

Figure 1

Four Cities Visited During Exploratory Study: Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, and Mashhad



Note. From *The World Factbook*, by Central Intelligence Agency, 2021 (https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/map) In the public domain.

These assumptions were first explored with a 14-participant questionnaire, which revealed that while each graduate preferred more autonomy, if given the opportunity to change majors, most would not because they believed the issues regarding graduate unemployment, employability, and job market struggles were more severe than just their own lack of motivation due to lack of autonomy. The study then moved on to in-depth interviews, using a biographical narrative approach to unpack these severities. Understanding the participants' stories and allowing them to speak freely about their lived experiences throughout Iran's school system, higher education system, and job market was paramount in exploring these relationships on a micro and macro level – as is recommended by the literature (Burke, 2014; Merrill & West, 2009). Throughout this process, I referred to the questionnaire results and interviews to identify patterns, relationships, recurrences, differences, and similarities – as recommended in the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Pettigrew, 1992; Stake, 1995; Willig, 2014; Yin, 2014). Upon a deeper analysis, an overarching theme was discovered that revealed a lack of support and guidance from educational institutions, society, the job market, and State. The recurring narrative of "no one helps you" reappeared throughout the interviews. When I probed deeper, insisting there must be some assistance, I continued to receive similar anecdotes. For example, career service centers did not exist in those nine universities (spanning four cities). They also did not have workshops on resume building, cover letter writing, or interviewing techniques. Moreover, job/career fairs were scarce. I learned of one job fair from Sharif University (Sharif University, 2019) which sparked my interest in investigating that university further.

As I returned to the questionnaire results and interviews I noticed that one major and one university consistently reappeared as an exception to what the interviewees were experiencing: engineering at Sharif University. This combination was considered the most prestigious within Iran, and its engineering graduates were considered elite among Iranians (Shahbazi, 2009). Sharif had also been – and still is – regarded as the "MIT of Iran" (Matthews & Lord, 2017, p.

27). With most high school STEM students striving to attend Sharif's engineering programs, admissions was very competitive (Kamyab, 2008). Additionally, university professors and administrators reported that the majority of Sharif professors were Western educated, which further increased the university's popularity and perceived quality of education. This also helped internationally, as Sharif has been excluded from many of the sanctions that kept most Iranian universities isolated from the global academic community (Matthews & Lord, 2017). It was also explained that while most engineer graduates in Iran struggled with double digit unemployment rates – 22% according to Habibi (2015) and Alibaygi et al. (2013) – Sharif engineer graduates were not considered among this demographic by Iranian society because it was believed they would either leave the country, continue their education (in or out of Iran), and/or find a job (in or out of Iran).

4.1 Research design

When comparing Sharif's engineering graduates with non-Sharif engineering graduates, a distinction can be drawn that the former were perceived by society as elite individuals who scored the highest on the *konkur*, were able to select the major they wanted, obtain a high-quality education from a prestigious university, and achieve some level of professional success. Therefore, I decided to focus on this specific group of graduates, and within them, individuals who had stayed in Iran and experienced the uncertainties of their country's job market. Thus, the seven-month fieldwork (June 2019 to January 2020) was designed as a biographical approach with in-depth narrative interviews. The participants' lived experiences during pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation was explored to gain a deeper understanding on the issues of professional aspirations, employability, and job market expectations. Furthermore, the participants themselves – young men with a bachelor's degree in engineering from the nation's top university – are an understudied group in the social science literature, and they may provide insight into Iran-related issues. This study engaged with five participants

through four rounds of in-depth narrative interviewing, with round three including a participant timeline. The research site was Sharif University in Tehran, Iran. Tehran had the highest number of university students than the next three provinces combined: 900,000 in Tehran compared to 800,000 in Esfahan, Khorasan (Mashhad), and Khuzestan (Department of Statistics & Information Technology, 2017). The context of this study is Iran's school system, higher education system, job market, society, and the State.

In addition to the gaps in literature, there are two more reasons why a biographical design was appropriate. The first reason was due to the limited access to educational institutions, certain areas of the job market, governmental entities, and the State due to their security and privacy rules. The second reason was due to the limited research within the Iranian context pertaining to the individual's lived experiences navigating the country's school system, higher education system, and uncertain job market. Moreover, my decision to focus on the individual graduate was also because of my own safety in not wanting to announce myself and my research to these State and governmental entities out of fear of jeopardizing my safety in possibly getting arrested, deported, or worse. As a result, this study's investigation of how Sharif graduates' professional aspirations had been shaped by their lived experiences within and throughout the country's school system, higher education system, and job market is the first of its kind. And this study required an exploratory approach with a biographical design and narrative interviews where in-depth analyses could be performed to reveal in-depth details of the issues and the individual's life (Roberts, 2002). A biographical design allowed me to explore, unpack, and capture my participants' perspectives and outlook (Roberts, 2002), as well as utilize any and all available sources. Also, with this research design, the epistemological and ontological commitments are within a social constructivist framework. In other words, knowledge and reality for the participants – as well as myself – are conceived through social, cultural, and

structural constructs of human interaction, interpretation, and understanding (Kukla, 2000; Vygotsky, 2012).

From Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920/1996) work from 1918 on Polish immigrants, to Johnson's 1976 gerontological research, the biographical method has provided an approach where the complexities between the individual and their surroundings can be explored in great depth and potentially help explain issues the individual is experiencing. Denzin (1989, p. 70), for example, discusses how a biographical approach can describe "turning-point moments" or epiphanies that are interactional experiences that have positive or negative impacts on the individual and shapes their life. Furthermore, researchers of the biographical approach have stressed the importance for a detailed account of the individual's life as well as access to robust sources in order to allow themes to naturally emerge, for the researcher's voice/input to be as little as possible, and for as much of truth to be revealed as possible (Holloway & Freshwater, 2009; Knowles, 2017).

I conducted my fieldwork with the same approach – I explain in more detail below – and focused on two fronts. On the one hand was the participants' personal, social, educational, professional, and historical experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). The particularities and complexities of the participants were researched in order to understand their activities during pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation. On the other hand, there was the issue of their professional aspirations vis-à-vis employability and job market expectations. I investigated the participants' stories and lived experiences, including what they experienced, how the experience happened, and the meaning the participants placed on these experiences which influenced and shaped them and their choices. Furthermore, biographical narrative interviews were employed to best represent and understand the participants' lived experiences, as suggested by the literature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Suarez-Ortega, 2013). Additionally, vignettes were incorporated to provide rich/thick

descriptions "that capture the immediacy of lived experiences and highlight the relationship between [the participants] and larger structural forces" (Borker, 2018, p. 58). I also incorporated a life timeline during the third round of participant interviews, which provided information about the main events of their life for us to explore further. Overall, this exploratory and collective approach developed an empirical understanding and conceptualization on the issues of graduate employability and professional aspirations in Iran that can contribute to future research.

4.2 Research method

The biographical design (Roberts, 2002) guided the overall methods of this study. The main data collection method was four rounds of in-depth interviews with each of the participants. This was supported by participant timelines, stakeholder interviews, and local documents. This study's biographical approach focused on the participants' lived experiences through Iran's school system, higher education system, and job market; as well as how they perceived the events that occurred during these parts of their life (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

In addition to the aforementioned on why engineering at Sharif University was selected, the decision to focus on bachelor graduates resulted from their larger demographic compared to other tertiary graduates. For the 2016-2017 academic year, bachelor students comprised of 49% of newly enrolled students, 57% of current students, and 57% of graduates (Department of Statistics & Information Technology, 2017). This also increased the likelihood of finding participants, considering most Sharif bachelor graduates either leave the country, continue their education (in or out of Iran), and/or find a job (in or out of Iran). To further increase the likelihood of finding participants, I set the age of participants to young adults, which is generally accepted in the literature at twenty to thirty-five years old (Armstrong, 2007). With the fieldwork conducted in 2019, the earliest graduation date would be 2005 considering Iran's

undergraduate program is four years and the earliest graduation age would be approximately twenty-one.

The decision to focus this study on men was due to security, relatability, and accessibility considerations. Security, because of the religious, cultural, political, and social connotations that accompany a scenario where a man and woman are spending an extended period of time together. As a country governed by Islamic laws and rooted in a conservative culture, two people of the opposite sex should only be together if they are blood related (but not cousins because it is lawful for them to wed) or married. Although there are exceptions to this understanding and certain leniency depending on where in Iran one is, I did not want to take that risk. Second, relatability simply because I am a man and my level of understanding and knowledge of an Iranian woman's lived experiences inside Iran is limited in order to research the female perspective fully and accurately. Finally, the accessibility in interviewing a woman, in private, on four occasions, where each interview could last roughly three hours is extremely difficult; and again, the issue of relatability and both of our security would be a risk I was not willing to take. Also, the decision to focus this study on men was not due to the fact that the overwhelming number of STEM students are male. Initially I was interested in masculinity and honor, but the exploratory fieldwork showed that these were not important issues for the interviewees, and neither was it important for the five participants of the main study.

Purposive snowball sampling was executed in selecting the participants. The decision for such an approach resulted from the exploratory study findings. I was substantively interested in the experiences of graduates from the most successful university in Iran. Society and academia had labelled this sub-group of graduates as elite, successful, and never unemployed. I hypothesized that this case could reveal new findings in the conversation of graduate employability and professional aspirations, and I required assistance in locating this group of individuals.

4.2.1 Recruitment

The recruitment process commenced in May 2019, one month prior to the start of the seven-month fieldwork. Eleven rounds of correspondence were conducted during those eight months. Six rounds resulted from my personal and professional contacts, and five rounds from an advanced LinkedIn search. The initial means of communication varied from email, text messages, and/or instant messaging (Facebook, WhatsApp, or Telegram) – some transitioned to in-person meetings. Although much of the LinkedIn search occurred parallel and simultaneous to my contacts' search, these two will be presented separately. A more detail account of the recruitment process is available in Appendix B.

The individuals I began with were friends, relatives, former co-workers and colleagues, and the people I connected with during the six-week exploratory study – all of this accounted for seventy-seven people. They were asked if they knew individuals that had connections to Sharif University or fit the research criteria of male Sharif graduates with a bachelor's degree in engineering who then entered the job market and experienced unemployment. After conversing with most of my contacts, they advised to expand the search because Sharif bachelor graduates either leave the country, continue their education (in or out of Iran), and/or find a job (in or out of Iran). Therefore, the criteria was expanded to include possible avenues after the individual experienced unemployment. Specifically, he decided to: (a) return to university for his masters, (b) complete his two-year mandatory military service (or, *sarbazi* in Persian), (c) leave Iran, and/or (d) start his own startup company, or (e) he remained unemployed. However, I maintained the emphasis that a gap of unemployment must exist between their graduation and them entering one of these five avenues. It was critical to explore the individual's lived experiences in the job market and being unemployed before possibly moving on to something else.

The LinkedIn search commenced two weeks after I started reaching out to my contacts (May 2019). I upgraded my LinkedIn account to LinkedIn Premium which included a Recruiter search feature that allowed for direct messaging with individuals who fit my criteria. Using the LinkedIn Recruiter search tool, the search was filtered to individuals inside Iran, with a bachelor's degree in engineering from Sharif University, who graduated between 2005 to 2019. The earlier year was based on the calculation that if the oldest potential participant was thirty-five years old within the year of the fieldwork (2019), his earliest graduation date would approximately be 2005 considering the common graduation age for a four-year undergraduate student in Iran is twenty-one. The results returned 1,179 individuals. In twelve days, 925 were investigated (293 of which were women). Of the remaining 632, sixty-four were contacted because according to their LinkedIn profile, they were either unemployed, seeking new opportunities, performing freelance work, started their own company, were entrepreneurs, or pursing a master's degree that did not commence immediately after they graduated from Sharif with a bachelors.

In total, of my contacts and LinkedIn search, 217 individuals were contacted in a seven-month span (May to December 2019). I contacted sixteen Sharif students, fifty-eight potential stakeholders (which included professors, university administrators, government officials, academic guidance counselors, and career services organizations), and 143 Sharif graduates. Of the fifty-eight potential stakeholders: seventeen did not reply, four could not participate due to company policy, and five were unable to assist. I met with thirty-two and twenty-four were willing to be interviewed, however, due to scheduling conflicts, I interviewed thirteen. Of the 143 Sharif graduates: seventy-seven did not reply, thirty-one were not interested in participating, thirty-five were interested and I met with twenty which led to the five participants: Karim, Cyrus, Nader, Ismail, and Darius. It took a span of four months to find the five participants. Karim was recruited first, through LinkedIn in May. One month later, through

snowballing that started with LinkedIn, Cyrus was recruited. In July I recruited Nader through my contacts and Darius through my LinkedIn snowballing. And a month after that I recruited Ismail through my contacts. Overall, the recruitment process was very hectic with a full schedule almost every day. It was not overwhelming, however, because a detailed log was maintained of all my activities in what resulted in a nineteen-tab excel sheet.

4.3 Research participants

When I came to an agreement with each of the participants and stakeholders I reexplained the details of the research and sought and received explicit oral consent (see Appendix G) for their participation. Two participants agreed to sign their consent form (see Appendix F). In addition to the participant information sheet (see Appendix H), I reiterated that they were under no obligation to participate in the research and could choose not to answer any question or terminate the interview at any time. I explained that their names would be anonymized to protect their privacy. Three stakeholders did not give consent to be audio recorded or for those recordings to be translated and transcribed by a translator. Therefore, I took extra detailed notes on our conversation and immediately typed them up after our meeting concluded. The following are descriptions on who the five participants and thirteen stakeholders were.

4.3.1 Participants

From the 143 Sharif graduates I initially contacted: seventy-seven did not reply, thirty-one were not interested in participating, thirty-five were interested but I met with twenty which led to the five participants: Karim, Cyrus, Nader, Ismail, and Darius. To reiterate, I was in search of male Sharif graduates with a bachelor's degree in engineering who then experienced Iran's job market before moving on to: (a) returning to university for his masters, (b) completing his two-year mandatory military service (or, *sarbazi* in Persian), (c) leaving Iran, and/or (d) starting his own startup company, or (e) being unemployed. Of the first fifteen graduates I did not meet,

none of them had experience in the job market and immediately continued their education after their bachelor's degree. Of these fifteen: seven were master's students, four went abroad, three were employed, and one started a company. Of the fifteen graduates I met with and decided not to include as participants: one had personal issues that kept him out of the job market between his bachelors and masters, two immediately went to *sarbazi* before enrolling for their masters, three began working immediately after their bachelors, three began their own startup, and six just graduated with intentions to pursue their masters. Thus, in short, none of these fifteen graduates had experience being unemployed. Within the six months these correspondences were transpiring, I met with Karim, Cyrus, Nader, Ismail, and Darius, who each fit my criteria.

4.3.1.1 Karim

I became acquainted with Karim through LinkedIn. Although he struggled in the job market, experiencing moments of unemployment, he was reluctantly optimistic that he would reach his professional aspirations. During pre-university, Karim's aspirations were solely focused on personal and intellectual growth. He greatly enjoyed learning and developing in many respects – philosophically, academically, psychologically, socially, and culturally. Within-university, Karim was preoccupied with his studies and had very little time to think about much else. Towards the end of his bachelors, Karim realized he wanted to either work for a company (particularly one that contributed towards the betterment of society) or start his own where they would have a positive impact in the country. By the conclusion of the fieldwork, Karim admitted he had yet to reach his professional aspirations but did not blame anyone or anything for his struggles. He strongly believed that he was in control of his destiny. He explained that his mentality was extremely different than what society taught its youth – which included him at a young age. His evolution and progression out of that one-dimensionality was not easy and needed work but he believed he was on the right path.

Karim grew up in a lower-middle class family one hour outside of Tehran. His parents had a modest education as well as modest jobs. He spent his pre-university years in his hometown where he attended public elementary school. After failing to be accepted into the middle school for the gifted, he continued his public school education up until he graduated high school. Public schools in Iran were operated and funded by the State and were free for students to attend. These schools were considered of lower quality when compared to private schools and schools for the gifted. Karim enjoyed competitive swimming as a teenager though abandoned it to focus on his studies. Despite limited opportunities, facilities, and capabilities, he was accepted into Sharif in industrial engineering. In addition to his studies during those five years, he also had a three-month volunteer job, an internship (three months), and was an officer in the student body committee where he was in charge of his department's graduation ceremony. When he graduated in February of 2018, he enrolled in a career services program at Sharif. This was to improve his "soft skills" and "hard skills" as it related to the job market in order to increase his likelihood of acquiring a job. Nevertheless, he took the MBA *konkur* as a backup plan in case he did not find a job so he could avoid the *sarbazi.* For seven months Karim searched and applied for jobs, posted his resume on employment websites, had one job interview, but no offer.

He was offered admissions into Amir Kabir University's MBA program, and eventually accepted. When we met in Tehran in June of 2019, he was deciding on whether to dropout and apply for a different master's program abroad. In the seven months we were together he was accepted to a university in Europe and was preparing to leave when his mother forbid him because she wanted him to stay with his family. He admitted later in our interviews an interest in still leaving and was considering it again. In the meantime, Karim continued his MBA studies and acquired a job as a data analyst. However, he was not happy with his situation and felt he had not reached his professional aspirations yet. Although he was hopeful and believed

he could reach his aspirations, he admitted there were many obstacles inside Iran for young men like him. Especially, those who aspired for a profession that aimed at improving society. He gave an example of how there is a resistance against such aims inside Iran:

> Poor guy, one of the physics lecturers, [redacted for confidentiality purposes], one of the decorated professors of Sharif. He studied at Berkley. He, with his own money, bought and brought books, meaning the government didn't help. He had purchased all the books from abroad, by himself … then came much criticism that … don't (laughs) … these (laughs) … I mean don't spread this {I can stop recording if you want?} no I'll say it, there's no problem, they forced him to retire. From a genuine place, he would criticize the university's condition, it's philosophy and policies, and they retired him. This is again one of those … instead of using the criticism, they retired him. *Karim*

4.3.1.2 Cyrus

Cyrus had a much more emotionally tumultuous journey. Growing up in the upscale parts of Tehran, Cyrus' family was very wealthy – whose fortunes dated back to his grandfather. He attended one of the elite private schools in Tehran from first to twelfth grade. The pressures from his private school was extremely stressful that some of his classmates became ill, had mental breakdowns, or developed spasms – and during the *konkur* became sick, vomited, and/or fainted. Although Cyrus' breakdown during the exam was not as severe, his acceptance into Sharif (in computer engineering) was a result of political nepotism. In other words, a fellow test taker also failed the *konkur*, but his father – who was a very powerful political figure within the government – enacted a law that allowed students with specific circumstances – like his son – to attend Sharif and Cyrus also qualified.

Nevertheless, Cyrus was one of the top students in his computer engineering department during his four years at Sharif. Throughout his bachelors, Cyrus worked part time as a coach, teacher, counselor, and *konkur* tutor. He graduated in 2017 and quickly went into entrepreneurship. In one year he started two startups. The first was lucrative and in demand. However, he shut down operations after a year because he could no longer afford paying off the government in what he phrased "under the table bribes" in order to stay in business. His altercations with municipal,

provincial, and federal officials and offices left him "frustrated and hopeless". I was surprised at how openly and freely he spoke of the government, but he said, "I don't care. I want them to know what they did". Somehow, he moved on and worked on his second startup. He, again, had confrontations with the government and was not allowed to publicize his app. Having been unemployed for a year, two failed startups, and the stress of the *sarbazi*, Cyrus unenthusiastically went for his masters.

I was referred to Cyrus by a human resources specialist that Karim introduced me to. Cyrus attended three job fairs during his time at Sharif and had an adequate amount of job offers – especially with a computer engineering degree that was considered the top field at that time. What was difficult for him was, on the one side, aspiring to build a successful company that could improve society while being stymied by the government. And on the other side, constantly being pushed towards jobs that did not contribute to the betterment of society or paid low wages that he could not support an independent life with his own family. In the time that I got to know Cyrus, he battled with feelings of depression, failure, and hopelessness against his personal drive and determination to achieve his goals. By the time I was preparing to leave Iran, Cyrus found a job. He told me he was enjoying his new job and the pay was good, but he considered his professional life a failure up to that point because of the obstacles that denied the realization of his own professional aspirations. Cyrus felt he had reached a ceiling he could not go beyond – because of what certain branches of the government did – and accepted that this was his life, for now.

4.3.1.3 Nader

I was introduced to Nader by a Sharif professor I met through one of my professional contacts back in America. Although a man of few words, our conversations were as equally fascinating as the other participants. Especially because Nader hoped he would finally discover what discipline he liked and what occupation to pursue. He noted that "even if this research does not

help me, I hope it helps other people like me". What he meant by "other people like me" was similar to Karim's point of trying to depart from the one-dimensionality that they felt their educational institutions and tentacles of the State were pushing them towards. Nader grew up in a lower-middle class family in a town seven hours away from Tehran. His mom was a homemaker, his dad had a "simple job", and neither were well educated. He loved soccer and wished to pursue it professionally but abandoned it to focus on his studies. When the topic of field of study, choosing a major, selecting a university, or finding a job came up, Nader did what he was told. As a result of his unsureness regarding these decisions, as well as a lack of guidance in trying to discover these answers, Nader followed his peers – who were also being told what to select and where to go.

Unlike Karim, Nader had no trouble passing the gifted school exam. He attended a gifted middle school and a gifted high school. And unlike Cyrus, Nader had no trouble with the *konkur*, ranking as one of the highest among his fellow test takers. Throughout his academic life, Nader was one of, if not the top student. School work, exams, and standardized tests came easy to him. He never stressed about these significant moments and never felt the pressures of having to achieve high marks or attend top institutions of learning. However, his indifference towards school and work grew as the years passed. As a result of his intelligence, Nader felt neglected with no guidance, which resulted in his aimless ascension through the *konkur* and into Sharif. He attended Sharif and majored in mechanical engineering. He finished his bachelors in four years (2017) but did not graduate until a year later. He would purposely fail his internship requirement to prolong his stay in Tehran, to evade the *sarbazi*, and attempt to find a job. Similar to Karim, he took the MBA *konkur* to help him buy time.

Although he did not know what his professional aspirations were, Nader knew he wanted to work somewhere that provided a service in improving society and paid well enough to support an independent life and family of his own. Similar to Cyrus, Nader had job offers, but declined

most of them because they did not meet these requirements – he described them as "dead-end jobs" or "simple routine jobs". However, he did accept some offers to help him determine what profession he liked or disliked, but his indifference persisted leaving him with no clear direction. As a result, he decided to accept the enrollment offer from Sharif to pursue his MBA. During his first semester was when we met. He enjoyed his program and was hopeful he would discover what career path he liked. He also searched for work, yet again was troubled by the same shortcomings. Nader eventually accepted a job in digital marketing but hoped for more. He was working towards leaving Iran through higher education (to pursue his doctorate), and was saving up the money to do so. Although he thought he could accomplish his professional aspirations inside Iran, he was unsure how, and had yet to do so.

4.3.1.4 Ismail

Ismail, on the other hand, was convinced there was no future in Iran. An equally intelligent man, Ismail relied on himself to overcome the obstacles he experienced. The connection to Ismail was a lengthy one. I went through four professors and a Sharif graduate to connect with him. Ismail grew up in a town one hour outside of Tehran. His family was considered middle-class, and his parents had a modest education and career. He attended public school because he was unaware of the schools for the gifted, but his attendance at public school was brief. Two weeks into his final year of high school – which was called pre-university – Ismail dropped out. He realized his school, and particularly his teachers, were not going to prepare him for the *konkur*. He studied on his own and was the only student from his high school to be accepted into Sharif. He majored in chemical engineering because he enjoyed it and thought since Iran was an oil rich country, he would have no trouble finding a job – he was mistaken.

Similar to Nader and Karim, Ismail prolonged his bachelors to evade the *sarbazi* (he graduated in 2015). During his senior year he took the engineering masters *konkur* and ranked 11th. He researched and discovered the job market was weak for chemical engineer graduates. There

were very few opportunities and those that existed were in the hands of the government – which meant low pay, remote job sites, and boring repetitive work with minimal job growth. Thus, with much condemnation from the people around him, Ismail decided against a master's in chemical engineering. Similar to dropping out of high school, Ismail made decisions that he felt were in his best interest. Very seldom did he listen to those around him.

During his extra semester at Sharif, Ismail took the MBA *konkur* but failed due to bizarre circumstances which he asked me not to divulge. Afterwards, he worked on a startup with two of his friends, while also searching for a job. His startup mobile-app would have been the first of its kind inside Iran. Similar to Cyrus, Ismail's team was confronted by the government and were prevented from obtaining the required paperwork and equipment. Soon after, a company launched a similar app which provided that same service, and it was partly owned by the State. Ismail also failed in finding a job inside Iran.

It was at that point Ismail decided to place his energy in leaving Iran. He strongly believed if he stayed he would end up struggling to find and keep a job, earn enough money to buy a house, make enough money to support a family of his own, before even approaching the possibility of reaching his professional aspirations. Similar to Karim and Cyrus, Ismail aspired for a profession that would allow him to contribute something towards the betterment of society. He admitted, however, that Iran was "way worse than what we were thinking". He explained that "if it was not the State who was suppressing you, society tried to constrain you to one specific path". That, coupled with the daily volatility of life in Iran where no two days were the same for Ismail (as well as the participants) resulted in him completing his *sarbazi*, taking the TOEFL and GRE, applying to American universities and gaining acceptance to a university for his masters. One example regarding Iran's daily volatility that Ismail provided was the example of grocery shopping. He said, if you look at most developed countries, their food costs do not

drastically increase on a daily basis to where you have to calculate what not to buy so you have enough money for your other expenses until your next paycheck.

4.3.1.5 Darius

My introduction to Darius went through four graduates, beginning with Karim. Darius grew up in a town twelve hours away from Tehran to a family considered middle-class. Similar to Nader, Darius had little trouble with school work, exams, and tests, even though he (and others) considered himself a sloppy student. One of his rationales for this was his indifference towards certain subject matter he considered uninteresting or useless. Nonetheless, he attended the school for the gifted, and participated in the national science Olympiad (receiving the silver medal in astronomy). Throughout this time, Darius struggled with low self-confidence. When teachers and peers would tell him he was not intelligent or skilled, or does not belong where he was because of where he came from, Darius would try less but still received high marks.

Darius grew up with a computer. He was fascinated with the hard and software aspects of it. He taught himself some programing languages, software applications, and played video games. Most occasions when he would retreat from the competition of school and Olympiad, he would play computer games. He was also interested in graphic art and even took the art *konkur* in addition to taking the math *konkur*. He scored very well on both but chose the latter because of the pathway he was on. He was accepted into Sharif where he majored in mechanical engineering. Darius described his educational journey as a specific path that required him to be one-dimensional and not deviate from the tracks set in front of him.

Similar to most of his fellow participants, Darius extended his undergraduate by one year. Unlike his fellow participants, Darius had a medical exemption from the *sarbazi*, and therefore one less problem to worry about, but he was still unsure about his future. During his fifth year at Sharif, Darius pursued his master's in mechanical engineering but dropped out after two

weeks when he realized there was no future in it within Iran, regardless if he had a bachelors or masters. After completing his bachelors in 2017, he was accepted for the MBA program at Amir Kabir University. My time with him began during his second year at Amir Kabir and by then he had many failed attempts in the job market and experienced similar problems like the other participants. Towards the end of our time, Darius started planning to leave Iran.

Similar to Ismail and Karim, Darius planned on going abroad, but Darius favored the possibility of returning to Iran after receiving his degree even though his experiences demonstrated far too many obstacles existed within Iran for him to realize his professional aspirations. Darius' professional aspirations were similar to Karim, Cyrus, and Ismail. As he described it, he wanted to be a "trouble-shooter" for societal problems. He envisioned this as some kind of integrated design approach. However, one of the obstructions confronting Darius' aspirations towards improving an aspect of Iran was that "they" would not allow it:

> It is very annoying that no one wants to improve anything. If sometimes somebody wants to do it, they are tagged with some outlandish label, and they're forced to leave. For example, some years ago Dr. Kaveh Madani had come … and became umm … what was it … the minister's advisor in environmental matters, about the issue of water that was set to be taken more seriously here in Iran to say what to do and not do. Then, nothing, they said so much about him that he fled the country, while he was invited at the highest level from Imperial College, he fled and is gone! *Darius*

The belief from the participants in not realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran became increasingly apparent throughout our conversations. Darius and Ismail were more hopeful about a life outside of Iran even with all those uncertainties. Darius was preparing to leave while Ismail was on his way out with an acceptance to a master's program in America. Karim was short of buying a plane ticket to pursue his masters in the Netherlands before his mother forbid him. He found a job while he pursued his MBA but planned on leaving. Nader wanted to go abroad but was financially unable. Therefore, he continued his education and worked in order to assess what course of action to take. Cyrus had no interest in leaving even

though he became hopeless about his future in Iran. He lowered many of his professional aspirations and found an adequate job (although he was unhappy) in order to increase the possibility of getting married and starting a family.

4.3.2 Stakeholders

Table 1 below provides the list of the thirteen stakeholders who were interviewed for this research along with some of their most notable comments. As stated above, I initially reached out to fifty-eight potential stakeholders. These stakeholders were individuals with professions in government, higher education (professors, administrators, and counselors), high schools (teachers and counselors), human resources, career services, and civil society. Seventeen did not reply, four could not participate due to company policy (high school counselor, high school teacher, professor, and an employment website), and five Sharif professors were not interested in participating. I was able to meet with the remaining thirty-two individuals. After I fully explained the scope of the work and answered their questions, eight declined to participate: three cited company policies that forbid them (human resources, high school teacher, and an employment website), another three stopped returning my calls (Sharif alumni office (2), and Sharif Technology Park), and two did not believe they would be helpful towards the research (Sharif professors). Of the remaining twenty-four, I was unable to coordinate an amicable interview date with eleven, due to continuing scheduling conflicts (government officials (3), career services (4), Sharif professors (3), and a former Sharif student journalist). A more detailed description of my stakeholders is in Appendix C.

Table 1

List of stakeholders interviewed

Stakeholder	Profession	Most notable thoughts
Dr. Ali	Sharif Business School Professor	He attributed political & economic issues to why many graduates were unemployed. The Iranian government was excessively involved in the job market.

Stakeholder	Profession	Most notable thoughts
		In most areas, meritocracy had been replaced with ideology & politics.
Dr. Hassan	Sharif Industrial Engineering Professor	The majority of Iranians were pessimistic, negative, & hopeless about their standard of living & their future inside Iran. More than half of *Sharifis* applied to go abroad. Iran is a very unstable country due to politics, economy, & ideological issues. Sharif & his department did nothing to assist its students prepare for the job market.
Dr. Hossain	Sharif Industrial Engineering Professor	*Sharifis* had high expectations & were not willing to work hard to incrementally prosper – calling them lazy. It was difficult to earn a wage to have a stable independent life, but it was not impossible. Obstacles exist in Iran, but they exist everywhere and did not believe going abroad would improve conditions.
Dr. Sajjad	Sharif Computer Engineering Professor	*Sharifis* had high expectations & were not willing to work hard to incrementally prosper. Emphasized faith in God, practicing Islam, and believing you can build a life from nothing. His department's internship program was outstanding, and the majority of their graduates acquired jobs.
Dr. Baqir	Sharif Aerospace Engineering Professor	Obstacles limited *Sharifis* from realizing their professional aspirations. One-dimensional mentality was imposed upon them. Iran is volatile because of domestic and international problems. There was no routine & you cannot plan for the future. Going abroad had some level of consistency from one day to the next; if rules and laws were abided you knew you could prosper with hard work.
Ms. Zaynab	Sharif Guidance Counselor	Her office incorporated a number of programs to acclimate incoming freshmen to life at Sharif. Provided an open door policy to all students who require assistance with the pressures of Sharif. Believed many of the problems her students faced at Sharif could be traced back to their upbringing at home, school, and society. There were pressures and competition of having to be the top student while concurrently being ignorant to what they were interested in pursuing academically and professionally.

Stakeholder	Profession	Most notable thoughts
Mr. Sadiq	High School Guidance Counselor	Provided counseling to students who were unclear on what university major to select. His students were pressured from their parents to either become doctors or engineers. He advised and challenged his students to view the positive and negative to every major they thought about selecting. Counselors during his time would glance at the student's *konkur* ranking and tell them which major to select. The younger generation of professors and counselors were more (inter)active with their students to ensure the same mistakes were not repeated.
Mr. Kazim	Sharif Entrepreneur Center	An organization within Sharif's Technology Services Complex – an ecosystem A once pilot organization in 2014 that later influenced other universities to follow. Protected students' ideas through non-disclosure agreements. Iran had weak laws and weaker enforcement on NDAs Supported students in finding reliable and trustworthy investors so *Sharifis* do not relinquish up-to 80% of their company. In most instances, those providing the funding and acquiring up-to 80% stake in the startup were affiliated with the State.
Mr. Rida	Sharif Career School	An organization within Sharif's Technology Services Complex – an ecosystem. Also a pilot organization in 2015 that influenced other universities to follow. Due to small funding & staff, they could not assist everyone, so they interviewed applicants and accepted those who were identified as serious job seekers Had mentorship program because the most pressing issue was "90% of *Sharifis* do not know what their interests, abilities, and skills are, and they feel lost". *Sharifis* were unaware of what the job market was like and had unrealistic expectations as a result. Provided training and seminars, resume and cover letter workshops, internship programs, and mock job interviews with real companies that sometimes evolved into real job offers.
Mr. Jawad	Co-founder of an employment website	Online platform that connects 6,000 companies with 15,000 university graduates. Does not provide in-person assistance but offers resume building, sources and materials to increase employability.

Stakeholder	Profession	Most notable thoughts
		There was a disconnect between companies and graduates. Some companies were starting to develop their own academies where they train their employees.
Mr. Hadi	Entrepreneur in 2 startup HR companies	Did not agree with my participants' criticism of the job market and the government. If graduates learned to write a proper resume, strengthen their network, and improve their interviewing skills, they would have no trouble getting hired. He agreed that most students' inability in deciding their field of study or profession was a result of obeying school and family.
Mr. Askari	Co-founder of a startup accelerator & employment website	Based on a 5-year contract, his accelerator provided a working station for the startups, along with mentoring and networking in exchange for a 10% share. He differed from other accelerators because he was not interested in discovering an idea and selling it. He wanted to cultivate a culture and community where generations could become successful. One reason why most startups in Iran fail was because all the team members have an engineering background with no one willing or able to perform administrative, marketing, or accounting tasks – he helps with this.
Dr. Mahdi	Government Official from a Ministry Office	He agreed with most of my participants' criticisms of higher education, the job market, and the State. There were branches of and individuals within the State that support and elevate specific careers and business over others. Regarding parts of the State: "there is much resistance to change, and in most cases, they don't allow for change to happen". Students were powerless in thinking about their future, their dreams or goals, or making long-term plans. Instead, they do what they are told.

Of all the potential stakeholders that I was unable to interview, it was only high school teachers that I was unsuccessful in recouping due to their schools' policies. After months of persistence, I was able to interview five Sharif professors, one guidance counselor from Sharif, a high school counselor, one government official, a human resources expert, two employment website companies, and two career services companies. Twelve of the thirteen interviews were

conducted during phase three, and the thirteenth interview was in stage four. The timing of these interviews was deliberately situated between the participants' second and third interviews (during their timeline interview) in order for the participants' comments to influence my conversation with the stakeholders; but also, the stakeholders' responses to influence my final conversation with the participants. The significance of interviewing stakeholders was because the literature on Iran was limited. I needed more information in gathering data and context which the stakeholders, as well as the collected documents, provided. A total interview time of nineteen hours and sixteen minutes was recorded with the thirteen stakeholders, averaging one hour and twenty-three minutes per interview. This translated into 302 pages, averaging twenty-one pages per stakeholder. Based on each of their professions and where they have a stake to claim: the high school counselor will support the first findings chapter (chapter 5: pre-university); the five professors and guidance counselor from Sharif will support the second findings chapter (chapter 6: within-university); the human resources expert, the two employment website companies, and the two career services companies will support the third findings chapter (chapter 7: post-graduation); and the one government official will support chapters 6 and 7.

4.4 Data collection

Data collection from the participants consisted of a triangulated four-phased approach of collecting and analyzing qualitative data, as recommended by the literature (Bowen, 2009; Erlandson et al., 1993; Hastings, 2010; Kohlbacher, 2006; Patton, 2002). This was accomplished by effectively documenting and organizing the data, contacts, and other information which increased the reliability of the work and maintained a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). Initially, the plan was for three phases, however, it became clear after three months that a number of themes were developing which I wanted to explore further. Specifically, the theme of the mafia, a *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* tension, hitting a ceiling, and being stuck on

a one-dimensional pathway. Therefore, I decided to add an additional round of interviews with the participants. This also provided extra time to interview the stakeholders and further analyze my findings and themes.

Throughout the fieldwork an iterative approach was performed which included an ongoing and simultaneous process of deduction and induction, along with a back and forth between theory and analysis as well as data and interpretation. During and in between each phase I conducted (a) in-depth interviews with the participants; (b) conversations with individuals willing and interested in talking (for example, Snapp and taxi drivers, relatives, neighbors, friends, co-workers, shop owners, etc.); (c) collected available documents; then (d) analyzed the findings, strategized, and prepared for the next phase. Throughout data collection, I performed what the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Pettigrew, 1992; Stake, 1995; Willig, 2014; Yin, 2014) has described as expanding upon the meanings within the data and the preliminary analyses by paying special attention to and making connections with patterns, relationships, recurrences, differences, and similarities with each participant, between the participants, and the stakeholders. The interviewing strategy was, but not limited to, understanding, unpacking, exploring, and reconstructing the participants' experiences and interpretations of higher education and the job market in order to richly describe the academic, professional, social, cultural, religious, political, and economic arenas they resided in, while developing an empathetic understanding of their world (Rubin & Rubin, 2004).

One way this was achieved was by structuring each phase with foundational guidelines while providing space to adapt and adjust based on each encounter. Also, I remained flexible in how interviews were structured. As suggested by the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Taylor et al., 2016), I remained mindful of the nature of our conversation – which included verbal and nonverbal cues, tone and pitch, attitude and content (from him and myself) – in order to achieve deep, detailed, vivid, rich, and nuanced data. I pivoted around a semi-

structured approach: if the interview required it, I shifted to either more or less structured while altering the questions to more or less open. Yin (2012) notes that open-ended interviews, when properly conducted, can reveal how participants construct reality. This was true during the interviews, but it was equally revealing when specific, simple, and closed questions were also asked. Additionally, each audio interview with its transcript (which were in English) was shared with the participants for additional confirmability and trustworthiness in and of the data (Guba, 1981).

I was fortunate to have had five participants who were comfortable and open in discussing every aspect of their lives. Often when I thought a question was too personal, I prefaced it with an apologetic explanation that they were not obligated to answer if they were uncomfortable. Without hesitation, the participants would say they "have no problem discussing anything" and I could ask any question. There was an eagerness to tell their story; at times talking for thirty to forty-five minutes straight and often interrupting me to recount an episode they forgot to mention. As a result, I was not required to ask many questions since their answers covered many points. As we progressed through the three in-depth interviews, it increasingly became apparent that their lived experiences throughout Iran's education system was primarily of a negative nature. This was brought to the participants' attention – Karim admitted at one point that he was "talking more about the dark side of things" – and I asked what the positives were. As the participants spoke on the positives for a few minutes, they slowly gravitated back to the negatives. Cyrus once said, "I know you asked about the positives, but I must mention this". This point, however, was not a matter of positive versus negative experiences, rather it was their reality that happened to occupy a more negative narrative. This is mentioned to avoid any presumptions that I led the participants down this path through a line of questioning. Furthermore, these stories were not unique to the participants, as the majority of stakeholders confirmed or echoed the participants' stories.

Furthermore, I drew inspiration from Plummer (1983) who discusses three stages of document research and analysis in the life history approach: (1) the exploratory stage, (2) the complementary stage, and (3) the concluding stage. I also drew upon Suarez-Ortega's (2013) three "biographical phases" when interviewing: (1) looking towards the past, (2) looking at the present, and (3) looking towards to the future. Finally, I drew upon Wengraf's (2001, pp. 119–120) three interview sessions: (1) "initial elaboration of story around topics", (2) "extracting more story from the topics", and (3) "further questions arising from preliminary analysis". The next four parts of this section will elaborate on these as each phase is discussed.

4.4.1 Phase one

Phase one incorporated Wengraf's (2001, pp. 119–120) "initial elaboration of story around topics" by looking towards the past (Suarez-Ortega, 2013) and exploring (Plummer, 1983) the participants' experiences and interpretations of Iran's education system. A biographical narrative approach was utilized because it provided a processual perspective of the participants' lived experiences (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Shank, 2006). By allowing the participants to narrate their experiences, with minimal interruptions, they had the freedom to discuss what they deemed important (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Wengraf, 2001). This avoided the injection of preconceived issues and captured the participants' point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It also provided insight into their feelings, desires, and thoughts (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick et al., 2011), in the context of the academic, professional, social, cultural, religious, political, and economic environment they inhabited.

For this first round of interviews, the participants came to my apartment. Prior to their arrival I readied my place, as it was customary for the host to be hospitable. Thus, I was prepared to offer them tea and sweets, fruit, and mixed nuts. When they arrived, I went down to the entrance of my apartment building to welcome them. As we settled in, we spent the first fifteen minutes speaking of pleasantries. As our initial conversation dwindled down, we transitioned into the

interview. First, the participants were given the information sheet and consent form to read. Then they were allowed to either sign the consent form or provide verbal confirmation during the audio recording. I also asked for their consent in sharing their audio files with a translator (which they agreed). Once we started the interview there were no problems in getting the participants to talk, and no topic was off limits. Karim requested I share my questions beforehand in order to gather his thoughts and "make sure I don't forget anything". I explained that the question was the same for all five of them: tell me about your experiences throughout Iran's education system. The participants were equally engaged in the interview and our conversation was very fluid. There was no awkwardness or uncomfortable silence. In fact, they had much to say and at times appeared anxious to talk based on the emotion in their voice.

The average time of the first round of interviews was two hours and forty minutes (Karim – 167 minutes, Cyrus – 120, Nader – 111, Ismail – 180, and Darius – 218). Each participant spoke for the first hour and half with no interruptions. During this time I wrote my questions and took notes. I informed the participants beforehand that I would do this but was still careful not to distract them. For example, I would glance down to write when they would break eye contact, or pause to think, or eat or drink. We then had a five-minute break and continued the interview with my questions. It was not important for all the written questions to be answered, rather, we fully explored their answers. Therefore, many follow-up questions were asked based on their initial answers and the unanswered written questions were left for the next interview. The participants were also afforded the opportunity to ask me questions. Most often they would ask the same questions I had asked them (marriage, employment, hopes, dreams, sacrifices, family, friends), and we mostly had those conservations during our breaks and/or at the end of the interview.

After each interview, my experience and thoughts were documented in a journal, as suggested by Janesick (1999). Then each audio file was sent to its assigned translator with a two week

turn around. During those two weeks, other individuals were contacted to schedule meetings or conduct interviews. Phase one lasted sixty-six days from 16 June 2019 to 20 August 2019. The first two weeks were spent handling administrative tasks: finding a place to live, finding a mobile carrier, and setting up a bank account. The reminder of phase one consisted of eleven phone meetings, thirty-three in-person meetings, and three participant interviews (Karim, Cyrus, and Nader). At the conclusion of each conversation I asked their assistance in providing documents they were willing/able to share, because as Merriam (1998, p. 126) explains, this "can ground [my] investigation in the context of the problem". The majority of them did not have documents nor knew where they could be found because it was not publicly available, or it did not exist. Others who referred me to sources warned that they may not be credible, or the information would most likely be incorrect or bias. Each translation was reviewed for accuracy and analyzed for emerging themes. I also compared the interviews as I developed my questions for round two.

4.4.2 Phase two

Phase two incorporated Wengraf's (2001) extracting more story from the topics by looking at the present in addition to the past (Suarez-Ortega, 2013) and exploring complementary information (Plummer, 1983) from the participants' experiences and interpretations of Iran's school system, higher education system, and job market. Phase two lasted for sixty days from 21 August 2019 to 30 October 2019. Three of the interviews were second-round interviews (Karim, Cyrus, and Nader). I also conducted first and second round interviews with Ismail, and a first-round interview with Darius. The average time of the second interviews was three hours and five minutes (Karim – 180 minutes, Cyrus – 136, Nader – 150, Ismail – 267, and Darius – 195).

The procedure of phase two was similar to phase one. The interviews were conducted in my apartment. The participants had opportunities to ask me questions – which they did, and I

answered. In addition to delving deeper into specific comments they previously made, we also discussed their present situation. The second-round interviews were more of a dialogue. I followed the recommendation of O'Reilly (2005, p. 116) in remaining "flexible and reflexive", while using "a range of interview styles" as suggest by Rubin and Rubin (2004, p. 16) to adapt to the fluidity of our dialogue. Therefore, combinations of unstructured, non-directive, semi-structured, and informal questioning techniques were adopted (Merriam, 1998). Similar to the first interviews, the participants were again eager and willing to talk about anything. Nader said he hoped he could discover what career he liked through our interviews, but if not, at least my work could help future generations. Cyrus said he had some frustrations he wanted to express and name names so [he] can shed light on these issues that are not talked about but prevalent in the job market. At the conclusion of each interview, an account was recorded in my journal, the audio files were sent for translation, and the findings were analyzed in preparation for phase three.

4.4.3 Phase three

I moved the third-round interviews to phase four and added a timeline interview to phase three. In addition, more attention was given to stakeholder interviews which helped prepare for phase four. Phase three lasted for forty-nine days from 31 October 2019 to 18 December 2019. During which time I had two phone meetings, eleven in-person meetings (three later became stakeholder interviewees), twelve stakeholder interviews, and five participant interviews. Of the five participants, a timeline interview was conducted with Karim, Nader, and Ismail. The rationale for such an approach was because (a) the participants' stories were very complex with many events overlapping and intermingling; (b) they required an alternative thought process in viewing their lived experiences other than me asking questions; and (c) I wanted to organize the participants' life events in chronological order. Furthermore, I wanted to explore what

Spradley (1979) discusses regarding potential tension between what they have done thus far in their life with what they ought to have done and what they planned to do in the future.

The initial plan was to provide each participant a large construction paper with a single line drawn horizontally across the middle and have them write the significant moments in their life along with key academic and professional milestones. Karim disliked the notion of handwriting on construction paper because he was concerned about making mistakes and the timeline looking messy. Cyrus and Ismail were concerned that there would not be enough room on the paper to fit everything they wanted. Therefore, we decided to work on Google Sheets – Nader and Darius did the same. A Google Sheets timeline was created and populated with the information they each provided from the first two interviews. The document was then shared with each of them, and we later scheduled a time to meet, discuss, and populate their timeline. Cyrus and Darius preferred to combine their timeline interviews with their fourth-round interviews. The average time of the timeline interviews was fifty-four minutes (Karim – 109 minutes, Cyrus – 45, Nader – 56, Ismail – 37, and Darius – 25). The procedure of phase three was similar to phase two with the exception of the location; our interviews were conducted at my office at the Sharif University Think Tank.

The twelve stakeholder (see Table 1 above) interviews were either conducted at my office or theirs. At the beginning of each interview the participants were given an information sheet and consent form – they each decided to verbally consent. Eight agreed to be audio recording and for a translator to translate their audio file. Written questions were prepared, although the majority of the interviews were unstructured. Once we started there was no problems in getting the participants to talk, and no topic was off limits – although I did not initiate politically sensitive discussions. The conversations were very fluid and effortless with each stakeholder providing insightful comments. At the conclusion of each interview, an account was recorded in my journal, the audio files were sent for translation, and the findings were analyzed in

preparation for phase four. Most of the stakeholders' descriptions and accounts confirmed the stories of the participants, but it also revealed some counter arguments that were included in the fourth-round interviews.

4.4.4 Phase four

Phase four incorporated Wengraf's (2001) further questions arising from preliminary analysis while looking towards the future (while being mindful of the present and past) (Suarez-Ortega, 2013) and concluding (Plummer, 1983) the in-depth interview process of the participants' experiences and interpretations of Iran's education system and job market. Phase four lasted thirteen days from December 19th to the 31st. During which time I had four meetings, one stakeholder interview, and five participant interviews. The fourth-round of interviews with Karim, Nader, and Ismail were conducted, and the timeline and fourth-round interviews were conducted with Cyrus and Darius. The average time of the fourth-round interviews was one hour and fifty-one minutes (Karim – 112 minutes, Cyrus – 170, Nader – 110, Ismail – 88, and Darius – 75). The duration of stakeholder interviews was one hour.

Phase four consisted of the same procedures as the first three phases. The stakeholder interview was conducted at his office. The information sheet and consent form was provided to him, and he verbally agreed to be audio recorded and for his recording to be translated by a third party. Although written questions were prepared, the majority of the interview was unstructured. The participant interviews were conducted at my office. These last interviews were more structured since I had counter arguments from the stakeholders and questions from phase two. At the conclusion of each interview, an account was recorded in my journal, the audio files were sent for translation, and the findings were analyzed

4.4.5 Documents

In addition to in-depth participant interviews and stakeholder interviews, local documents (in Persian) were also collected. These documents contributed contextual, empirical, and evidentiary support for the lived experiences the five participants described throughout their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation journeys. I was unable, however, in obtaining credible data on unemployment, transfer, dropout, and graduation rates in order to provide a backdrop to where the participants were situated in. This was important because of Iran's complexities on two fronts: (1) domestically, there were political, economic, social, cultural, and religious issues to consider; and (2) internationally, there were foreign policies, sanctions, and conflicts to consider. Furthermore, with the media controlled and/or regulated by the State, the information provided to the public was criticized for being bias, incomplete, and/or unreliable. Iran does not have freedom of press like the United States or Europe. One of the stakeholders said, there is freedom of press, but there is no freedom after what you say. The government official I interviewed explained that such public data cannot be trusted. Moreover, as a policy, Sharif University, its departments, and many of the entities and stakeholders were prohibited from sharing such information.

In addition to the documents, I also created an informal database from the findings. Data was collected on graduate unemployment, for example, in specific fields from specific universities, yet I was unable to find data on engineering majors from Sharif University. Thus, the credible documents available on Sharif graduates were statistics on the university's brain drain. For example, one study from the class of 2012 showed that 31% left Iran after graduating but another 30% left years later. In a smaller study for the class of 2015 in the mechanical engineering department, 40% left the country. Regarding government data, what I have acquired was dated back to the pre-revolution years (before 1979); and what does exist from this current regime is census data on higher education and graduates. Government data on

employment and unemployment rates are highly contested and mostly dismissed as bias. Nevertheless, I continued to search for documents and data. For example, I joined eleven Telegram groups or channels (see Table 2) that focused on an issue important to *Sharifis* in the hopes of finding pertinent documents and/or data.

Table 2

List of Telegram groups and channels focusing on issues important to Sharifis

Telegram channel	Description	Followers
Military Service Deduction	An employment channel that helps young men find jobs that are accepted by the army to substitute for their *sarbazi.*	20,050
Sharif Club	A startup accelerator for *Sharifis*	10,488
Jobinja	An employment channel for job seekers	10,710
Sharif Job	An employment channel for *Sharifis*	4,492
Job Vision	An employment channel for job seekers	83,112
Sharif Daily	The Sharif Newspaper	5,771
Career Counseling	A support counseling group for Sharif graduates seeking employment	1,928
Sharif University Tweets	A channel that posts tweets from *Sharifis* in Telegram	11,941
Economic Channel for Sharif Graduates	A channel for Sharif graduates who discuss economic topics and issues	903
Karboom	An employment channel for job seekers	8,258
Sharif Policy Research Institute	A think tank that provides policy proposals to the Iranian government	981

4.5 Data analysis

A rigorous procedure was performed to properly and fully analyze the data from the twenty interviews conducted with the five participants. I followed the checkpoints or steps by Janesick (2011) as well as Miles and Huberman (1994) – Appendix E provides the complete list. Data analysis took place in between interviews and meetings, throughout the fieldwork and research,

as well as during the write-up phase. This was concurrent with the period of data collection, as is widely recommended by qualitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2005). As a result, this encouraged interaction between data collection, data analysis, and the research design (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). A grounded and inductive approach was employed throughout the data analysis in order to avoid constraining the data by adopting, *apriori*, a fixed framework. A thematic narrative analysis was also utilized. This allowed for the "complex interweaving of the past and future within the present" (Mills & Borker, 2018, p. 2), and the social (among other things) dynamics surrounding the participants.

A total interview time of nineteen hours and sixteen minutes was recorded with the thirteen stakeholders, averaging one hour and twenty-three minutes per interview. This translated into 302 pages, averaging twenty-one pages (in Microsoft Word) per stakeholder. Regarding the five participants, a total interview time of forty-two hours and thirty-one minutes was recorded, averaging eight hours and thirty minutes per participant (or, two hours and eight minutes per interview). This translated into 915 pages, averaging 183 pages per participant (or, forty-six pages per interview). These calculations do not include the numerous encounters, interactions, conversations, and meetings I had with individuals other than the participants and stakeholders.

There is also an eighty-eight-page journal which includes analytical memos, reflexive thoughts, developing theories, and contextual nuances. I triangulated the data by cross referencing my journal with my interview transcripts, local documents, and other conversational notes as is suggested by the literature (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). I have an entry for each day of my fieldwork, and periodically during data analysis and write-up. I also documented as much about myself as I did of my surroundings and interactions. For example, immediately after each conversation I documented the sounds, atmosphere, location, time, weather, facial expressions, body language, hand gestures, and tone. I also described my

impressions about each person I interacted with – whether that was a participant, stakeholder, or a (random) stranger. Moreover, I wrote about my own experiences, feelings, concerns, and ideas. My journal served multiple purposes in addition to preserving a comprehensive record. It also assisted with my reflexivity, positionality, conceptualizations, interviewing, and more.

I individually reviewed each English translation of the voice recordings for accuracy. I reviewed each of them a second time with consultation with the translators if necessary. In addition to making corrections I also wrote notes, memos, and questions. Then I uploaded each translation document into NVivo 12, organized the files into folders, and began the first round of coding. The NVivo 12 software provided a range of tools to support the coding, reduction, and pattern finding activity necessary for drawing out themes. Significant time was allocated to analyzing the participants stories. I also analyzed the stakeholder interviews and local documents in order to identify relationships and compare the participants' between themselves. The latter two primarily serve as empirical, supplemental, and contextual data due to the scarcity of literature.

The first round of analysis through NVivo continued with the deduction and induction approach from during the data collection, as well as the back and forth between theory and analysis, data and interpretation, and what I aim to address through the research question and what is being revealed through the data. With a meticulous approach to listening to each interview while reading along with its English translation, I created – but not limited to – a series of codes, raised questions, wrote memos, and noted reflections and remarks. For example, I started with four main codes: pre-Sharif, Sharif, post-Sharif, and Individual. The decision to group the codes in such a way was influenced by how the participants told their life stories. As the analysis progressed, sub-codes began to emerge; for example: competition, guidance, ceiling, *konkur*, mismatch, and society. I decided to give numerical value to most of the codes because the participants explanation of mismatch, for instance, during their pre-Sharif time was

different than their post-Sharif time. Therefore, pre-Sharif changed to 1. pre-Sharif and its corresponding sub-code mismatch also began with the number one. Similarly, post-Sharif began with number three as well as 3. mismatch. This helped organize the instances where the participants discussed the same code at different times of their lives. I also began color coding these codes and sub-codes together.

Round two followed the same procedure as round one but with the addition of seeing if any of the questions would be answered by the data – for example, what alternative explanations are there for why the participants believed they could not realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. I was mindful of Miles and Huberman's (1994) four stages of data analysis – particularly data reduction during this round. As a result, I sought clarification, refinement, and (in)consistencies with each participant as well as comparatively. I also re-organized, re-worded, and re-grouped (sub)codes. For example, I noticed three words that were used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people while also referencing the same barriers the five participants were encountering. These words were *khodi*, *ghayre khodi,* and mafia. I took the same approach as above in adding numerical values to these sub-codes. However, I also had to re-code some of the previous coding from round one because at this juncture, certain meanings and definitions were taking shape that required further analysis.

Round three continued with the same procedure as round two, further re-grouping and re-organizing of codes with an emphasis on themes while further creating sub-codes. The most notable adjustments resulted from the tension I noticed in some of the participants' explanations. For example, nepotism versus networking, aspirations versus hopelessness, success versus failure, having versus being, certainty versus uncertainty, and *khodi* versus *ghayre khodi*. I also reevaluated the analysis I performed up to that point because of the correlation between data analysis, rigor, reflexivity, positionality, and biases.

At this point I was confident in the analysis through NVivo 12 because it revealed how at each stage of the participants' life – pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation – they experienced a series of obstacles that they believed pushed them on a one-dimensional pathway, which then prevented them from exploring, identifying, and realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran. That was when I began analyzing the thirteen stakeholders' interviews and documents because as Yin (2014) argues, this information can help corroborate and augment the data, and situate the participants' stories within the context in which I am researching.

4.5.1 Translators

The decision to hire translators inside Iran came after the first round of interviews. While the interviews and conversations were in Persian, I decided to translate the interviews to English because my Persian reading comprehension is not as strong as my listening and speaking. I do not believe the meaning was jeopardized because my Persian listening comprehension is strong. Therefore, the combination of the two sufficiently portrayed the participants' accounts. Also, I could have translated the interviews myself, but I determined that the time required to do so would be better served towards (a) finding/meeting/interviewing stakeholders, (b) finding additional participants, and (c) searching and researching literature, media sources, and documents. As a result, I updated the consent form and information sheet, and obtained the participants' permission. I also amended the CUREC to reflect this change after the CUREC permission was granted to hire translators (see Appendix J).

The decision to hire five translators was for three reasons. First, it was to designate each translator to one participant. This maintained a continuity where each translator grew accustomed to their participant, and was able to understand their participant's accent, use of vocabulary, and tone. Second, conducting five interviews within a two-week span allowed me to send each audio file to a translator so each file was translated simultaneously thus increasing

efficiency. Upon each completion, I would read the translation while listening to its audio file and made corrections for accuracy, punctuation, and likeness in word choice. Then I self-audited the work and conversed with the translator(s) to ensure we properly articulated the participant's meaning – this also provided an audit trail and a level of confirmability in/of the data (Guba, 1981). Furthermore, during the analysis and coding in NVivo, I ensured that metonymies words and phrases were grouped together under the one code. For example, the one-dimensional pathway was often referred to as a rail, track, road, or path. The third reason was due to security, safety, and political reasons. Only translators who a trusted source recommended were contacted. Eight translators were interviewed and five were hired. Two of the three that were not hired was due to their poor translating ability. The other was not hired because I suspected he had an affinity towards the State which was problematic considering the participants often criticized the Islamic Republic. I did not want to risk the possibility that he might inform the authorities of my research, as well as the participant's convictions. The five translators I hired were not suspect to such sympathies, I still did not want one translator to have access to all of the participants' interviews.

4.6 Qualitative rigor

In continuing to draw on Guba's (1981) work, there are three aspects in ensuring confirmability. First was through an audit trail – as mentioned above with the translators. I also shared each audio interview with its transcript (which were in English) with the to further ensure every interpretation of their translated words was accurate. My journal entries and interview notes also contributed to my audit trail. As did the critical feedback from my supervisors and tutors in improving the quality of my work. Second, was through reflexivity (in section below) by revealing my epistemological position – social constructivism – to my reader (Guba, 1981; in research design section above). Third, was the triangulation – which is also related to credibility – in "collecting data from a variety of perspectives, using a variety of

methods, and drawing upon a variety of sources" (Guba, 1981, p. 87) – this was explained in the data collection section above.

To ensure credibility (or validity, as it is called in most quantitative studies) I performed the aforementioned triangulation by collecting data from a variety of perspectives and sources: stakeholder interviews, participant timelines, and document collection in addition to the in-depth participant interviews. As discussed in the data collection section, I also performed an iterative approach which included an ongoing and simultaneous process of deduction and induction, along with a back and forth between theory and analysis as well as data and interpretation. Peer debriefing has also been performed, as has member checking or validation with the participants – which will also help confirm the trustworthiness or authenticity of the work (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Guba, 1981).

4.7 Reflexivity and positionality

The arrival at conducting this research developed after seventeen years of personal and professional trips to, and extended stays in Iran. Every year I discovered an increase in unemployment coupled with a decrease in standard of living. Throughout this time I continuously heard stories of how dreams were geographically found outside the boarders of Iran and aspirations were seldom attained within. This outlook inspired me to conduct a series of independent studies between 2006 to 2012. Speaking with anyone willing to talk, I engaged with relatives, friends, neighbors, and strangers at coffee shops, hookah bars, sporting facilities, and private family/social gatherings. What I compiled from those conversations led me to the last two years of high school, the *konkur* exam, and the four years of undergrad. In short, the absence of autonomy over their educational trajectory led to an underdeveloped understanding of their professional aspirations.

For the next five years (2013-2017) I worked for and with major Iranian organizations on issues related to human rights, public policy, foreign relations, international business, and international law to determine what possibilities and opportunities existed in improving Iran's employment opportunities and standard of living. Not only did the standard of living continue to decline but the job market worsened due to a multitude of foreign and domestic issues. Also during this time I rigorously engaged with all forms of literature (in English and Persian) pertaining to Iran in the hopes of uncovering pertinent material I did not obtain through my profession. I discovered that the voice of the youth – for example my participants – was lost within the political and economic discussions that monopolized so many debates.

This led me towards an investigative path where I interviewed education, political, and economic experts in Iran, policy experts in America, and academics in Europe. They confirmed that the youth narrative within Iran in relation to higher education and job market experiences was needed and greatly undocumented. Thus, I began this doctoral research with an aim that goes beyond just a degree. This study is not just an academic exercise, but I am fully aware of my biases. After twenty-one years in this field, I am cognizant of how I am positioned in this research and juxtaposed with the participants – an awareness emphasized by the literature (Merrill & West, 2009; Wengraf, 2001)

Nevertheless, to curb my biases, strengthen my ethical compass, and further ensure the rigor of the research, I remained self-critical, reflexive, and reflective – as suggested in the literature (Adler & Adler, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Moss, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2004) – while self-monitoring throughout the fieldwork, data analysis, and write-up. This is a constant process of self-reflection and attempting to gauge the nuances between careful analysis and reflected biases. A conscious effort was made to remain reflexive throughout and be forthright about my own positionality. Such an endeavor is not an outcome but a process upon which I continue to reflect. This approach is supported by Mann (2016) who also recommends being conscientious

on how the dynamics of subjectivities may influence the research process and its outcome. There is also a continuous balancing act between outsider and insider, and objectivity and subjectivity. Particularly as someone who was born (and briefly lived) in Iran but raised and educated in America.

Thus, as a halfie – as Abu-Lughod (1991) describes it: people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage – I am further sensitive to my positionality as a Shia-Muslim with Western tendencies, and a Persian-Iranian with American thought-processes. However, I do subscribe to Abu-Lughod's argument that to assume that someone from the same nationality cannot be impartial in their research is to accept that the other is impartial in their research. Both types of researchers deliver their own value systems that must be acknowledged. It is not possible to dissociate identities and biases completely; researchers should instead be mindful of minimizing them. I have spent significantly more time in America, even though I have strong professional and personal ties within my country. As a result, I was able to draw from the advantages of being both an outsider and insider. I used my intimate knowledge (language, culture, religion, society, for example), connections, and ease of access as an insider while maintaining an unbiased and objective approach as an outsider. As an insider I did not require the assistance of gatekeepers, interlocuters, research assistants, interpreters, or tour guides. This strengthened safety measures by eliminating third party colleagues and having myself as the sole point of contact and owner of sensitive material. As an outsider, some of the cultural rules that dictate interpersonal relationships – like gift giving – was not expected from me.

Furthermore, researching a known context was a source of insight. I was already aware of many facts of life associated with the research, and thus, could acclimatize much faster than an outsider. For instance, I had an understanding from personal experience of the basic structure and content of the education system, approximate class and holiday dates, and appropriate

values and norms for the field context, which were distinct advantages during and after fieldwork.

4.8 Ethical considerations

In addition to the DREC and CUREC approval (see Appendix I), I abided by the BERA ethical guidelines for educational research (4th ed., 2018). I also acquired the appropriate travel insurance (see Appendix L). Furthermore, the Fieldwork Safety and Risk Assessment application was approved prior to my departure from Oxford – which required an additional 7-page, 45-question supplementary form due to the research being in Iran (see Appendix K). These safety measures proved advantageous at the end of my stay in Iran due to the conflict with the United States I had to leave sooner than scheduled. My safety was not in danger, nor did I believe the two countries would go to war, however, with the pressures from my family and friends, and the support from my department, I left three weeks earlier. Fortunately, the research was mostly completed by that time. This section will discuss the ethical concerns of the fieldwork and research by examining the seven months in Tehran through Flinders' (1992) multi-framework approach as shown in Table 3 below. It is common to focus on one of the four frameworks provided by Flinders. I, however, briefly discuss all four frameworks considering the level of potential risk and ethical considerations in conducting such a research in Iran.

Table 3

Ethical frameworks in relation to recruitment, fieldwork, and reporting

Variable	Utilitarian	Deontological	Relational	Ecological
Recruitment	Informed consent	Reciprocity	Collaboration	Cultural sensitivity
Fieldwork	Avoidance of harm	Avoidance of wrong	Avoidance of imposition	Avoidance of detachment
Reporting	Confidentiality	Fairness	Confirmation	Responsive communication

Informed consent forms (see Appendix F and G) provided the participants with the opportunity to fully grasp the details of the research, raise concerns and questions, and decide whether to participate. They were offered the option of an oral consent in case they were uncomfortable signing a written document – three of them chose this option. When these five individuals agreed to participate, none of them refused or changed their minds later on in the interview process or after fieldwork concluded.

Regarding reciprocity, although I periodically offered assistance in whatever capacity the participants may require, only Ismail asked for help. The other participants were happy to help with the research. They were hopeful of learning more about themselves and their lives to determine the mistakes they had committed up to that point and decide what course of action to take moving forward. Ismail also mentioned this, however, he was the most determined to leave Iran, therefore he asked for assistance with his English while he studied for the GRE and TOEFL. Prior to each of our interviews, we spent thirty minutes to an hour studying English. We also spoke on the phone on four occasions. Each time for one hour and we worked on a practice English speaking question for the TOEFL exam. Additionally, I offered him advice on (a) which American universities to apply to; (b) how to write a personal statement; (c) what his references should write in their letter; and (d) which parts of America will suit his personality and lifestyle the best. I also provided Cyrus marriage advice at the end of our last interview when the topic of marriage was discussed.

There were two ways I collaborated with the participants. First, each of their audio files and its translation were shared with them in a private google folder. This allowed them to engage with and review the work. Second, adding the timeline interview allowed them to take the lead in one of our meetings. They dictated the pace of our conversation, what topics would be discussed, and when to finish the meeting.

Regarding cultural sensitivity, upon entering the field, I was prepared to be viewed and judged as an outsider, however, that was not the case. The individuals I encountered were very warm, welcoming, and helpful. They recognized me as an Iranian even though I was raised in America. Moreover, I did not commit any cultural or social faux pas from the relationships with the five participants to the stakeholder interviewees (and the other individuals). On the contrary, I was complimented multiple times for my knowledge of Iranian etiquette. My cultural awareness decreased many ethical concerns that I will explain below.

One way I avoided harm for myself and the participants was conducting our interviews in a private, secure, and trusted location. The first two rounds of interviews were at my apartment where it was only the two of us. The last two rounds were at my office where my employer (Sharif University Think Tank) provided us privacy and protection. Another way we avoided harm was by maintaining a high level of discretion regarding our relationship, interactions, and conversations. Neither the participants nor I felt that our safety was in jeopardy (and nor was it) even though this topic can be considered an overtly political issue. My experience during those seven months confirmed what Iranian scholar, Arabestani (2018), described from his fieldwork: the State authorities tolerate the transgression of the unwritten laws of prohibition as far as the research does not *overtly* [emphasis added] question the nodal points of the politically dominant discourse and *does not appear in the public sphere* [emphasis added]. A common mistake by many non-native researchers while in Iran is announcing their presence to the government which increases the likelihood of harm upon themselves and the people they interact with.

According to Flinders (1992, p. 105), avoidance of wrong is defined as not deceiving one's participant(s) nor treating "them as research pawns", rather being honest and direct. This was crucial because in Iranian culture newly acquainted individuals immediately begin as best friends that often ends in a confrontation. An open and transparent line of communication with

each of the participants was continuously maintained. Thus, they did not feel deceived or exploited. One example occurred with Karim and my boss. One day when Karim came to my office for our interview, he met my boss and said he was one of his professors in his master's program. At that time, I was writing an article with my boss and planned to use some of the findings from the participant interviews. I explained this to Karim, and he gave his consent. Another example of how wrong was avoided was by answering the participants' questions and sharing their audio files and translation with them.

Regarding avoidance of imposition, at some point during each interview I reminded the participants that they were not obligated to (a) participate in the research, (b) be audio recorded, or (c) have their recording translated by a third party. The participants also recognized that they could opt out of the research at any time – even after I leave the field. Finally, they were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question. The participants were also informed, on multiple occasions, that certain topics could be avoided if they were uncomfortable speaking about them. However, they had no issues talking about anything. Furthermore, they were comfortable being audio recorded and having a third party translate that recording. In addition, I remained mindful of not imposing on the participants since they each had other obligations to attend to. For example, Ismail required substantial time to study for his TOEFL and GRE exams. Therefore, we coordinated our interviews and meetings around his schedule, and confirmed a suitable location according to his needs. On two occasions I met with Cyrus at his office because it was easier for him. Additionally, Cyrus and Darius were not able to meet on four separate occasions and requested we combine our timeline and fourth-round interviews. I also did not overwhelm them with an inordinate amount of correspondence.

Regarding avoidance of detachment, as a result of the success in reciprocating and collaborating with the participants, while being culturally sensitive, and avoiding harm, wrong, and imposition, the avoidance of detachment was subsequently achieved. As Rubin and Rubin

(2004) recommended, I cultivated a sincere and cordial relationship with an open and honest line of communication. I was mindful of what Cassell (1982) and Flinders (1992) warned against by making sure the participants' perception of my authority/power as the researcher/interviewer was not interpreted as assertive or distant. For example, I was prompt in replying to their messages and emails and answering their phone calls. If they required assistance I did not hesitate to help. I sent them cordial messages during the holidays or if a major event occurred in their life. For example, I wished Ismail good luck on his TOEFL and GRE exams; I also wished Cyrus's father a speedy recovery when he was hospitalized for two days. The last time we saw each other they thanked me immensely for the time we spent together and what they learned about themselves through our conversations.

Regarding confidentiality, each participant was given a copy of the consent form and information sheet. During the seven months we worked together I remained in compliance with our confidentiality agreement. This included, but was not limited to, maintaining anonymity and the proper and secure handling of data and information (see Appendix I – Section 9) to protect them from "stress, embarrassment, or unwanted publicity" (Flinders, 1992, p. 103). Specifically in regard to publicity, the translators, for example, did not know the names of the participants. Furthermore, in maintaining the participants' anonymity, certain names and descriptions about their lives were also rephrased or concealed to further ensure their identity will not be discovered.

Regarding fairness, incorporated throughout the findings chapters was the stories of the five participants. The depiction of their lived experiences will be fair because drafts of the findings will be shared with them to ensure they do not feel betrayed, misrepresented, exploited, or embarrassed – as suggested by the literature (Creswell, 2007; Flinders, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2004).

In continuation of the fairness in telling their story, confirmation required me to "attribute the best possible motives" to the participants that is "consistent with [my] understanding of the relevant" information without being judgmental, rather considering what the "participants are striving to achieve" (Flinders, 1992, p. 107–108). Again, this will be achieved when drafts of the findings will be shared with them.

Regarding responsive communication, due to the success in reciprocating and collaborating with the participants, while being culturally sensitive, and avoiding detachment, the conversations, agreements, and reassurances made with the participants regarding consent, confidentiality, fairness, and the avoidance of harm, wrong, and imposition were clearly understood and acknowledged by each participant.

4.9 Limitations

One limitation was the challenges of conducting research in Iran. There were two instances that created setbacks. First, for one week in November 2019 there were protests, riots, and a partial internet blackout. I overcame this by adapting to the situation and altering the work accordingly. For example, I changed the communication methods to land-line telephone calls. I also stayed in my apartment and worked from home. While there was a partial internet blackout, Iran based websites (with a .ir URL) and telephone apps were still operational. One interesting example was the numerous available Wi-Fi connections I found on my smart phone and laptop during the internet blackout were primarily labelled with security forces' names. Furthermore, the part of Tehran where I lived had very little public demonstrations, most likely due to the strong security presence by the authorities. The second instance occurred in January 2020 when the U.S.-Iran conflict increased with talks of war. As a result, I left Iran one week earlier than planned, but was able to finish the research beforehand. However, considering very little is known on the professional aspirations and job market returns of Iranian bachelor

graduates, this research revealed compelling findings that will lay the ground work for future research on Iran, as well as expand the conversation and contribute to the literature on (graduate) unemployment, human capital theory, and employability.

A second limitation could be the number of participants. The decision to focus on five participants was influenced by the literature (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). On the one hand, having too few participants weakens the researcher's ability to examine variations, patterns, and recurrences which supports a more thorough cross-case analysis and leads to a relatively more robust study (Stake, 1995). On the other hand, having too many participants can cause a decline in the quality and quantity of information gathered, as well as the depth in each participant being studied (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, this study examines the participants' individual lived experiences through an in-depth qualitative account which places an emphasis on the depth of the analysis, not the small number of participants.

A third limitation is gender. As explained above in the research method section I focused on men for this study. The exclusion of women does limit the work, but I believe the novelty of the research lays the foundational work for future research that can focus on female graduates from Sharif, or any other university.

Chapter 5. Pre-university: Creation of aspirations

This chapter consists of three sections. In section one the participants describe how they felt Iran's education system worked against them in trying to explore their professional aspirations. Three themes will be threaded within section one to highlight the participants' encounters with their educational institutions, the meanings they made of it, as well as their interpretations. First, is the national entrance exam for the schools for the gifted – an IQ exam administered during the transition period from elementary to middle school. The second is the National Science Olympiad exams, which occurs in the second year of high school. The third is the national higher education entrance exam (or *konkur*), which occurs at the end of high school during their pre-university year and is the sole deciding factor in admissions into university. The participants described that instead of offering a variety of classes in multiple disciplines in order to expand their minds and explore their options, their middle and high school teachers, counselors, and administrators minimized the importance of discovering their aspirations and interests while pushing them towards a one-dimensional pathway. This push was also aided by governmental entities that pursued a curriculum specific to the State's policies; as well as family members, friends, classmates, neighbors, community members, and strangers reminding the participants to listen to their school, teachers, and counselors.

Section two details the participants' experiences in how they believed the educational, governmental, societal, and State actors did not help them in discovering their interests in order to determine what course of action to take regarding their academic trajectory to reach their professional aspirations. Instead, the participants explained how they felt either neglected or misguided by the people around them. The underdeveloped guidance infrastructure they detailed demonstrates an effectiveness in keeping the participants uncertain about their plans and future while pushing them down a one-dimensional path. Finally, I briefly discuss how the

isolated nature of schools from universities added to the participants' difficulties in exploring not only their aspirations but the major they liked and the university they wanted to pursue.

In section three the participants discuss their experiences of feeling pushed in becoming one-dimensional. In other words, the participants' believed their sole focus during this first stage was ranking high on the *konkur* and gaining acceptance into a top-tier university. They depicted growing up in a system where they could not think about anything beyond what was in front of them, and what was in front of them came with its own limitations and stipulations. Irrespective of their successes or failures, the participants felt pushed towards a one-dimensional mentality. If they succeeded, they were labelled as a gifted student, pressured to major in a STEMM program, attend a university like Sharif, and felt neglected along the way because they were seen as smart enough to handle this journey on their own. If the participants failed, they were labelled as unintelligent and subsequently neglected. Either way, they felt discouraged in thinking about their future, thus remaining unaware about their professional aspirations. As a result, the participants' professional aspirations had yet to take shape. Instead of discussing options and debating scenarios about their future, the participants felt controlled in doing what they were told. The vignette below from my conversation with Darius highlights this:

> We were kids, our breath still smelled like milk. No one told us why we have to take this path – we were like soldiers marching there and back just following orders – years later it is revealed why but we've come so far with blisters on our feet so surely this has not been a mistake? But so what if it is? No one cares. It's like a factory. They tell the schools what to do and we all follow. This ancient, traditional system is problematic. They chastised a classmate for promoting Buddhism because he wore a T-shirt that said Budapest … Budapest! A capital of a country for crying out loud! This is terrifying! These closed-minded people are just following orders from higher up. They don't care … unless you riot … we had a dreadful Arabic teacher, so all his students stood outside the school refusing to go to class until he was fired. *Darius*

5.1 An education system working against you

These scenes and interactions between the participants and their schools highlights a tension in this relationship where the former felt bombarded with obstacles that were impediments in their ability to (a) persevere onto the next stage of their lives – which they were following because they were told to – and (b) explore their aspirations – which they did not know was possible. Instead, the participants felt that the school system, as well as members of society, were trying to keep them on a one-dimensional pathway. Furthermore, the influence these obstacles, impediments, and inabilities had on the participants were not felt until they later realized how unprepared they were for the future.

Another element of the one-dimensional path the participants felt stuck on was the faith-based disposition from their schools, neighborhood, as well as the people in their life – which was also propagated by State run media outlets – when the conversation about their aspirations and future would arise. The participants explained that instead of an environment where they could explore academic interests or discuss scenarios about their future, their schools, communities, and tentacles of the State would curb such contemplation and redirect them towards the one-dimensional aspiration by saying, move forward one step at a time and not worry about the future because it is in God's hands. Darius explained that "there is an old saying that God controls everything in Iran, so no one takes responsibility for the problems of the country or how to remedy them".

This mentality the participants felt was being instilled in them led to three experiences. First, they felt they were taught from a young age to believe in this one-dimensional path because it would lead to a guaranteed and successful future. However, some of the aspirations the participants did have during pre-university they later realized was not their own but rather goals dictated to them. Darius also explained that the education system had an ideologically tailored

curriculum that taught them "this is good, this is bad, this is halal, this is haram, this kind of person is good, this kind of person is bad". What was troubling for the participants, however, was who was defining these terms of good and bad, halal and haram. While Cyrus' private school had some level of autonomy from the State it had to use State approved teaching materials. The schools for the gifted that Nader and Darius attended, and the public schools that Karim and Ismail attended were in complete control of the State. Thus, definitions of good and bad, halal and haram as well as comments like "they tell the schools what to do" and "following orders from higher up" pointed to the State and its tentacles of influence.

Second, the participants described a sense of ignorance regarding the influence this one-dimensional attitude had on the way they viewed their future throughout pre- and within-university. As Darius illustrated, "society and school postponed living and the students were unprepared to start their life after higher education because they were unable to imagine what that life could look like" – I will expound on this later in the chapter. Third, they described the struggles of accepting what society and their school system were telling them to do or not do, and be or not be. And how they faced obstacles in opposing the one-dimensional mentality in order to pursue their own interests and explore and discover their own professional aspirations. When the participants spoke of their younger years and how they felt their school and society pushing them down a one-dimensional pathway they did not feel much negative emotions when reliving those moments because as they explained, "that's the way it was for everyone. It happened and it's over … there's nothing we can do about it now so why get upset". The resolve in each of the participants was strong. With each story they told about a hardship, a setback, or an obstacle, it concluded with their declaration of moving forward, evolving, maturing, and adapting in order to reach their aspirations.

For example, Karim greatly desired acceptance into a school for the gifted like Darius'. He "did not have anyone to help" him prepare for the exam, so he studied on his own. Growing up

in a town one hour outside of Tehran, Karim had a humble upbringing: his parents had a modest education, and his family could be considered lower-middle class. After failing the gifted school exam and enrolling in public school, he experienced obstacles that accompanied his new label as unintelligent, or as he put it, "not being smart by society". One example was when he wanted to participate in the Science Olympiad:

> I really liked Olympiad. Olympiad was always a level higher than the classes you had. Like mathematics, chemistry, physics … were a level, not a level, many levels higher. I didn't have that confidence and my school didn't acknowledge Olympiad, and the people around me felt the same way so I thought it's something difficult. It's impossible to go. Maybe one of the reasons was the teachers at the gifted schools were much more competent. [The gifted schools] bring people who have passed [the Olympiad exam] to teach, [the government] doesn't bring them to the public schools. *Karim*

In addition to feeling labeled unintelligent, Karim's school was not provided with a top caliber faculty to help him down this pathway he saw and heard as the best way to reach one's future. This oversight for Karim was disheartening as he recalled moments when he became increasingly hopeless towards his country's educational and societal assistance. At times, Karim also became hopeless about himself. One of his earliest aspirations was obtaining knowledge. Karim enjoyed learning and therefore desired to attend high quality educational institutions. However, after failing to gain acceptance into the school for the gifted and not having the opportunity to apply for the Olympiad, he was convinced he would not rank high enough on the *konkur* to receive acceptance into a top university:

> There's an ideology in Iran that one of the ways to fulfill your dreams is through university [and] society is dictating in a way that the konkur has become that goal somehow […] it's … been forced by the society and dictated that success is in terms of … [the konkur] […] If you can in this, in this tournament … perform well, you'll be labelled as good. I didn't expect to pass [the konkur] at all. I thought [gifted students] are from a different world. They studied somewhere else they are definitely better than me. *Karim*

As he described the ideology on how to achieve aspirations, what those aspirations should be, and that those aspirations should be tied with the tournament style culture of the *konkur* – where

knowledge and aptitude were substituted for memorization and strategy – Karim went on to describe how school and society constantly pushed a one-dimensional mentality where he was fixated on the schools for the gifted, the Olympiad, and the *konkur* which he felt prevented him from thinking beyond these goals. Thus, an example of how Karim's aspirations were being shaped for him. Nevertheless, and despite the lack of guidance and support from his public school and society, Karim studied on his own and from his success on a practice *konkur* exam was offered a scholarship to enroll in a private *konkur* class where his tutor was a teacher at a school for the gifted. As a result, his score was sufficient to gain him acceptance into Sharif, and Karim was one of two students, of the eighty he graduated with, who went to Sharif.

Cyrus was one of twelve students, out of sixty from his private school, to gain acceptance into Sharif. Unlike Karim who was discouraged from believing he could make it to a top-tier university, Cyrus was overwhelmed with the pressures to out-perform his classmates and score high on the *konkur*:

> Everyone told us, "study and you will ace it and be accepted in a good university and you will build your life"; or no, if you can't, you will destroy your future. And they put a lot of pressure that you should study and get accepted [in university] and be successful. And because of that we tolerated all the pressures, because if you go and study and for example you're accepted in the best university like Sharif, your future is guaranteed, and you will have no worries and the future will be very good for you. We tour ourselves to pieces. […] it's a negative feeling. *Cyrus*

Cyrus grew up in a very wealthy household in the upscale parts of Tehran. His neighbors were politicians and doctors, and his classmates were their children. His grandfather made the family wealth and his father increased it until his retirement into real estate investment. Being able to afford private school provided Cyrus facilities and capabilities remarkably advanced that he had school twelve months out of the year and never thought about applying for the schools for the gifted or the Olympiad. However, despite his best efforts, Cyrus ranked 7,000 on the *konkur*

– Darius and Nader, for example, ranked 89th and 13th respectively. He described the atmosphere leading up to the exam:

> In high school everyone said "just konkur". They made everyone's dreams just the konkur. "Take it, if you're accepted, everything will be fine". This that I am saying, I'm not exaggerating, if you talk to high school students especially those who are in their pre-university year, konkur is like a monster for them and their minds revolve around the monster of the konkur […] several of my close friends got nervous tics. One of them fainted, the ambulance came to our school and took him away because the stress and pressure on us is so high. Well, one of them one week before the konkur was confined to a hospital bed […] during high school my only concern was to reach the summit of the konkur and nothing else mattered […] I didn't have time to think about anything else. *Cyrus*

From these two passages, Cyrus further illustrated the ideology that Karim reported. The pressure of having to rank high enough on the *konkur* or else he had no future was too much for Cyrus to bear. His score was not only unacceptable for Sharif, but no university in Tehran would accept him. Cyrus' admissions into Sharif, therefore, came at the aid of one of his fellow test takers. Although they both failed the *konkur*, this particular individual's father was a very powerful political figure and considered a *khodi*[6] within the State:

> **Cyrus:** […] I wanted to say how high he is in the government. His son got in [because] a path opened up for him and I got into Sharif with him.
>
> **Reza:** When you say a path opened up for him…
>
> **Cyrus:** I mean a rule was added that said that people like this could come to university, which didn't exist before.
>
> **Reza:** What do you mean by people like this?
>
> **Cyrus:** Something called [redacted for confidentiality purposes] was added, which is over now. We went but it's over. I mean they no longer can get into university like that.
>
> **Reza:** Did they do this on purpose for his son?
>
> **Cyrus:** Yes

6 The literal translation is, 'of us' or 'us'. Individuals with a connection to the State. This connection can be through – but not limited to – employment, family, marriage, association, or allegiance. With this connection, certain – but not limited to – social, economic, religious, political, financial, business, investment, cultural, concessions, privileges, advantages, and benefits are available to these individuals.

Anecdotally, stories like this were ubiquitous during fieldwork, but they were always hearsay. This was the first first-hand account I heard about the State performing such an act. Although Cyrus did not consider himself a *khodi* he benefited from his close proximity to the *khodi* (through his family's wealth) in discovering the non-publicized rule to gain acceptance into university – or in his specific case, Sharif. Considering his acceptance had little to do with his private school, Cyrus was critical of the way they treated their students:

> It's very stupid that the school would push us so hard, which would make us sick. Why? Because the school would become very famous. After we graduate, the school would advertise everywhere, "our school's outcome was better than" [other private schools]. […] [Addressing his school:] what contribution have you given? You have not made the students stronger. You just used them. […] And after graduation you say, "all our students are at Sharif". There is no value in this. *Cyrus*

While Karim's criticisms of public school was accompanied by admiration for gifted and private schools, Cyrus' criticism for his private school demonstrated that regardless of the type of high school, the one-dimensional aspiration was being formed within them.

Moreover, Cyrus learned to compete individually instead of collaboratively through teamwork. He explained how he and his classmates distrusted each other and were forced to be selfish in order to progress. Cyrus, along with the other participants, described how this individualistic mentality was not exclusive to school and how it existed in society where people were focused on themselves because of the daily struggles of trying to survive in Iran. Additionally, they reported that many people cheated and stole to make ends meet; or the rich did it to become wealthy. The participants blamed society for this individualistic mindset that had turned people against each other (Ghanyatpishe, 2005; Mafi & Mafi, 1999). They also saw the State as an enabler who was content with and preserved the socially accepted norms in order to continue to keep them on the one-dimensional pathway. When I asked Cyrus how he unlearned these habits he said, "I'm still unlearning them". He stressed the continuous difficulty in overcoming the "pressures to be like everyone else" because of its prevalence. He attributed his faith (Shia-

Islam), his mother (a psychologist), and his own will to persevere and succeed as to why and how he unlearned those habits.

Ismail's upbringing was more comparable to Karim's. He grew up in a town one hour outside of Tehran. His parents had a modest education, his family was middle-class, and he attended public school. Similar to Karim, Ismail experienced the expectations for an unintelligent public school student, but through a different medium. Ismail was unaware of the gifted school exam and the Olympiad exam. He explained that "there was very little information about these" where he grew up. He also never heard of Sharif University until high school. He was fully aware of the importance of the *konkur* exam, however hopeless in receiving assistance from his school and the people around him:

> Two weeks [into my pre-university year] I realized that there was a huge difference between what the teachers were teaching us and what we were supposed to know to take part in the konkur. It would have been impossible to get accepted in konkur only based on what they were teaching us. It was something totally different. When I told my math teacher about this, he said that he is not supposed to hold a "konkur class" here and he is just teaching based on the book provided by the [government]. It wasn't his duty to teach for the konkur. Officially, what he said was true, but it just demotivated me. *Ismail*

Karim and Ismail felt their public schools did very little in preparing them for the one goal they were told to accomplish if they wanted a guaranteed and successful future. The two explained how their final year of high school – which is titled pre-university – was supposed to include preparations for the *konkur* exam (Islamic Parliament Research Center of The Islamic Republic of Iran, 2006), but their teachers seemingly neglected the *konkur* aspect of their curriculum. As a result, Ismail decided to drop out and study for the *konkur* on his own. His school and family were against this decision – his principal telling him "you are making the biggest mistake of your life" – but it did not change his mind. In fact, he had no difficulties in convincing his mother:

> …I asked her to look at the result. My school that had a pre-university level … what's the output? Who are they? The students who graduate from this school … which universities are they accepted in? What are their [konkur] rankings? This is not how it works. It's not possible in this way. This method will not have any results. And she said ok. *Ismail*

Public schools for Karim and Ismail were void of any advanced facilities like Cyrus' private school. Furthermore, the quality of their teachers were lower than Nader and Darius' schools for the gifted. Ismail, for example, explained that although he was unsure what he aspired to be, he refused to believe that public school students were not gifted enough or unintelligent to rank high on the *konkur* and attend a university like Sharif. Thus he dropped out of pre-university and with hard work and determination was the only student from his graduating class of sixty students to be accepted into Sharif.

Nader, on the other hand, was one of nine students from his graduating class of fifty at his school for the gifted to be admitted to Sharif. Unlike Karim and Cyrus, who studied for one and three years, respectively, for the *konkur*, Nader studied for eight months. School always came easy to Nader. He never felt the pressures of exams or school work. He endured no hardship in earning acceptance into the school for the gifted or Sharif University. The Olympiad exam was of little interest to him, primarily due to his unfamiliarity with the subject areas and uncertainty in what he liked to pursue, and that was Nader's primary struggle throughout his academic and professional life. He never discovered what his interests were. He admitted in our interviews, on more than one occasion, how he made mistakes in his decision making because there was no one to constructively guide him. Thus, he followed his peers when deciding on a university, and they were following what the people around them, in school and society, were telling them to do:

> Going to Sharif was like going to the gifted school, it didn't make a difference to me. But everybody said from the beginning to perform well in konkur and go to Sharif, it was something that was so prominent that I wanted to go to Sharif as well. I saw that

> everybody's trying to get in, but not everyone can, so I thought something is going on there – even though I didn't know what – so I said sure, I'll go. *Nader*

Then, when choosing his university major, he continued to search for valuable guidance but to no avail:

> The school counselor only was there to see when your grades are low and would come to you and ask you why do you have low grades, for example if you didn't perform well on the test he would come to you and say why didn't you perform well and would plan for you to study. It was all related to studying […] and because I didn't have any problems in studying the counselors didn't have much to do with me […] there wasn't someone who would help me find this. I mean, I used to talk to them, and they would respond that way like "choose electrical engineering" or "choose mechanical engineering". […] Somebody like me, when they get to choose the major, and they don't know what to do, or what they should do … in my opinion, I don't know, like somebody has to do something so the person who wants to choose his major knows that choosing a major is like this, and then your job is going to be in that field. Mechanical [engineering] is going to be like this. Civil [engineering] is going to be like that. *Nader*

A parallel can be drawn here between the participants. They felt a lack of support and guidance during their pre-university experience. Although their different experiences were intriguing – Darius because of his "sloppiness", Karim and Ismail because of their label of being unintelligent, Cyrus because his school was preoccupied with their own reputation, and Nader because of his uncertainty and indifference – perhaps the how and why of their neglect raises more questions. The how was by having their aspirations formed for them and being told that those aspirations of high marks in school, top rankings on the *konkur*, and acceptance into a top university would lead to a guaranteed successful future. Then being pushed down a one-dimensional pathway to accomplish these goals because that was how they were told they could reach a successful life. But as the participants followed this one-dimensional path, they felt neglected in their pursuit.

Furthermore, the emphasis that schools, teachers, society, family, and classmates placed on the *konkur* was exacerbated by the *mafia* that ran it. I was first introduced to this colloquial term *mafia* by Karim, but the participants explained it as a conglomeration of certain private,

government, State, *khodi*, and/or *khusulati*[7] organizations who were in the *konkur* business. The three main organizations were the *Sazman Sanjesh* (or the National Organization for Educational Testing, the governmental body that administers the exam), the *Gaj*, and the *Ghalamchi*. It was speculated that the latter two were *khusulati*, but I was unable to verify those reports.

The participants, and some of the stakeholders, reported that this *mafia* had become so influential over the decades that they had diversified into a multi-million-dollar industry with television programs, mobile phone applications, computer software, study material, prep books, private classes, consulting firms, and tutoring. The participants also reported that while there were policy proposals to either alter or eliminate the *konkur* by members of parliament and local NGOs (Sobhani & Shahidi, 2007; *"Rahkare hazf konkure"*, 2020), every attempt had failed due to the *mafia*'s power and influence (Pouyan, 2016; "*Tahre do foriti*", 2020). Thus, one part of the why (the participants felt neglected) was the lucrative business of the *konkur*. Considering this multi-million-dollar industry provided a steady stream of revenue – especially with a volatile economy, international sanctions, high inflation rates, and political corruption – and the *mafia* had monopolized this industry, it appeared highly unlikely this aspect of Iran's education system would change. As a result, the participants believed they were pushed towards this one-dimensional aspiration. However, they did not know (a) where this one-dimensional path would take them; (b) what was meant by a guaranteed successful future; (c) if they had other options; and/or (e) whether these aspirations with its own pathway was what they actually wanted; and then (d) what their own aspirations were.

[7] *Khusulati is* a company that is partially owned by the private sector and partially owned by the State or *khodi*

5.2 Misguidance and inaction

As the participants relived their pre-university stage during our conversations, they explained that for the first time they were revisiting and reexamining a part of their life they had seemingly left behind. In doing so, three (f)actors emerged that highlighted the participants' experiences of feeling misguided and neglected by the people in and out of their school system: guidance counseling, society, and the transition from high school to Sharif.

5.2.1 Guidance counseling

In addition to the highly-centralized context of the education system, and society, the participants experienced their counselors reinforcing the one-dimensional pathway. This was another part of the why because local documents had shown a robust debate regarding the need for reform in the counseling apparatus (Islamic Parliament Research Center of The Islamic Republic of Iran, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), but according to the participants and three of my stakeholders (Dr. Mahdi, Ms. Zaynab, Mr. Sadiq) these debates were ongoing for thirty years with no meaningful change (Islamic Parliament Research Center of The Islamic Republic of Iran, 2018). Each of the participants either experienced very little guidance or assistance in selecting their university major, or what they did experience they described as unhelpful. According to Mr. Sadiq and Dr. Mahdi (one of the stakeholders, a Government Official from a Ministry Office), high school counselors were still university students. These were individuals who were one or two years older with no experience in the job market, and limited knowledge about their own discipline. They had no formal training in counseling, nor were they well informed on the several majors their students could choose from. As Nader said:

> They did not know what's what. Perhaps this was the reason as to why they couldn't guide us well. I mean, maybe if they had brought in someone who was, for example, six years older than us … someone who had finished his education. Someone who was employed. Or, someone who had gone after finding a job. *Nader*

Mr. Sadiq, who was a high school counselor, echoed Nader's experience and described how most counselors were unqualified with very limited experience in the job market. The counselors' qualifications were: (a) they graduated from the high school that hired them, (b) they ranked in the single or double digits on their *konkur* exam, and/or (c) they were attending a top-tier university like Sharif. He went on to describe how most counselors at private schools and the schools for the gifted were incentivized to push students towards Sharif in exchange for bonuses – either monetary or materialistic compensation. The counselors I spoke with, including Mr. Sadiq, explained that their profession had no strict regulations or assessments; there were no courses or programs to take, nor any required experience. One counselor reported that, "many talented and educated psychology graduates can't get these jobs because the schools have already hired someone they know".

Mr. Sadiq recalled similar experiences when he was a student, therefore, when he became a counselor he promised himself he would help his students discover what discipline they wanted to major in and which university they wanted to attend. Interestingly, he did not challenge them on possibly pursuing a different path outside of that which was explained above. Rather, he attempted to improve/alter the existing path for his students. In the five years he was a counselor, Mr. Sadiq counseled approximately one hundred high school seniors and around sixty percent struggled to identify what their professional aspirations were in order to pick the appropriate major. When I asked him why sixty percent did not know what career they liked he replied that they "never thought about it because they didn't know they could think about it".

A counselor like Mr. Sadiq did not exist for Nader – nor did it exist for the other participants. As a result, Nader was, again, left following what society, school, and his counselor were telling him to do:

> Well, back then it was like everyone … well my rank was 13, but I don't know up to rank 40, 50, everyone – except four or five [students] – were like, let's choose electrical engineering or mechanical engineering. […] Back then there was such an atmosphere. Like I said my own information was little, and such an atmosphere existed. […] when I, myself, wanted to choose my major, I did not have an understanding as to what it was, for example if I choose mechanical engineering then what can I do with it later? What is the job market, what expertise is even needed inside the country, abroad? Perhaps if I knew [more] I would not have chosen this choice. […] if I knew then that the job market is going to be better for, um, programmers, developers for example, perhaps I would have gone toward software [engineering]. *Nader*

The absence of guidance, or misguidance from the public schools, private schools, and schools for the gifted, coupled with a focus on the *konkur* signified a systematic problem where the participants felt overwhelmed and preoccupied with these aspirations. As I argued with Nader on why he did not try harder to find out what subject area, academic major, and/or career he liked (or did not like), he replied with bewilderment that he "just didn't know where and how to look" or what to look for. He also accredited his young age and ignorance but argued that he believed the people in his life at that time knew what was best for him, so he followed their instructions.

As a result, the participants' aspirations were being formed for them and they remained dubious about their future. The participants felt they did not have time to think about their mid- to long-term goals and professional aspirations; and when they moved on to the next phase of their young lives, they continued with no true purpose except to accomplish the next task.

> During that time you never realize that there was a wall because you were thinking that this is the only way and that's it. This [system] was established some time ago. […] In Iran, education is such that it has a specified pathway and if there is another way it will not be education. […] I mean, these institutions were founded that when you can only choose between math and science […] they were not allowing anyone to [do anything else]. *Darius*

Darius' mention of "this system" that "was established some time ago" highlighted the problem of the State's disinterest in changing the system they had established some time ago. Furthermore, it pointed out the highly-centralized context that had shaped the participants'

aspirations during their pre-university time. Much of the evidence provided in this section is covered in the literature – for example, the competition and focus on grades and standardized tests, or the neglect the participants experienced. However, what does raise questions in the Iranian context is very limited change occurred even after robust research and literature exposed these issues within Iran and proposals were offered. As Dr. Mahdi, the government official stakeholder, stated, "in most cases [they] don't allow change to happen […] these conversations have been going on and very little has changed".

Darius' above quote about how he could only choose between math and science for his high school major was the experience of all students who attended a school for the gifted at that time. Public and private schools, on the other hand, offered five high school majors: math, science, humanities, art, and vocational training. Darius grew up in a town about twelve hours away from Tehran. His family had a modest life, considered to be middle class. After passing the gifted school exam, completing middle school and his first year of high school, Darius had to decide between two high school majors: math or science. He enjoyed art as much as math, but Darius never felt encouraged to pursue it:

> [Choosing art] always came and went in my mind but what happened at the end, I said no, because I was in a school that the people who are there were more significant in society and the probability that you become a more successful person is higher and because especially art, the major of art … the people who were very lazy chose art, some subcultures were created in their schools regarding morale and behavior, they became the people who were not very healthy … then for example these considerations caused me not to try in that field and not think about it, because it was not offered as a thinkable option, because they made the condition so hard and complex. *Darius*

This was another example of how the participants' believed their aspirations were being formed for them while they were being labelled and separated. The first was Karim and Ismail being labelled as not gifted. The second was, the participants being told that in order to reach a successful life they had to conquer the *konkur*.

5.2.2 Socially accepted citizenship norms

The participants explained that the example of non-STEMM individuals being viewed as "lazy" and unintelligent began from the 1979 Revolution and the State propagating that the majority of artistic expressions were against the teachings of Islam, and therefore a sin, prohibited, and some were punishable by law (Agah, 2019; Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, n.d.). To further this propagation, the participants explained how societal discourse and the manifestation of that discourse, via media and entertainment outlets, and mosques and religious centers often appeared to assist the school system in teaching the participants that "a profession in art was immoral" and/or unsuccessful. For instance, Darius explained that "majoring in art in school was disapproved in society". They were taught that "intelligent and obedient students major in math and science, and later become successful in life". Thus, not only were the participants feeling pushed into certain majors, they also felt pulled away from the humanities and social sciences. Darius recalled not feeling any negative emotion for not pursuing art for reasons similar to what Nader explained: immaturity, ignorance, and trusting the people around him. However, Darius did stress his indifference towards the majors he had to choose from:

> No one spoke to me and said, "ok, imagine, what you like your job to be twenty years from now." [or] "in which activity you feel you are happy" or test me to find in which fields I work well. […] there was no other solution. […] *Darius*

Ismail's recollection on that time of his life was quite poignant: "I regretted my past a bit … I told myself … that I could have lived differently or maybe everything didn't have to be about studying because you initially set the foundation for something and continue accordingly, but later on, when it changes, it … affects you". The change he was referring to was the guarantees of a successful life if he focused on the aspirations he was told, but only to realize later that not only was that not the case but he was uncertain about what direction to take and how to remedy his situation. There has been much debate on expanding school curriculum by strengthening

the humanities and social sciences, and providing more options, but these proposals have broadly been ignored ("*Ulume ensani*", 2020; "*Madares farhang*", n.d.). Mr. Sadiq also alluded to this problem when he said, "the youth are pushed [away] from humanities towards the majors with jobs". Additionally, most of the stakeholders and the participants reported of similar defalcations and deficiencies of non-STEMM disciplines.

Nader grew up in a town seven hours away from Tehran. His parents were not well educated, and he considered his upbringing to be in the lower-middle class. Nader was a talented footballer yet was never encouraged to pursue it. He described following a one-dimensional path that pushed him towards math or science and was led to believe that anything counter to this was not an option or would not lead to a life of success:

> If we say the view of society, family, school, etcetera, etcetera, everybody thought that if you are a smart person, well then go study [math or science]. Especially the fact that humanities in Iran is really in a bad state. Like I said, the view of society, the view from everybody is that if you can you must go study these. Now if you cannot, okay, go choose humanities, or choose vocational majors. It's not like they say, "which one do you like?" Even between math and science, they say "these students are not good at math they shouldn't choose math", or they say, "your math grade is good, why do you want to choose science?" Well perhaps he wants to become a doctor. But like I said, if you can, you should choose this path, and if you cannot, well go try other paths. Well, I was someone who could [choose this path], and like I said neither family, society, relatives, friends, nor school, they never suggested like "do you want to choose a vocational major?" They didn't even ask. […] I think, the only time that I could and was able to try different things was then. And society, school, family should have allowed me to try music, pursue football seriously for some time. I think this wasn't possible at all. *Nader*

Karim, who competed professionally in swimming, had a similar experience with his family:

> They had no idea about majors. Like I tell them humanities is really good, this and that, and they are like, "No way! Humanities is not useful at all! Either computer or nothing!" […] What's their purpose in the upbringing of their kids [when] they truly don't have any idea because there's no chance in Iran's educational system to learn [different majors]. You just go to pass classes. […] Honestly, another shortcoming that we have in Iran is we have no idea about majors at all! […] we don't have any insight at all. *Karim*

One account, in particular, highlighted these problems described by Nader and Karim where the participants illustrated a path they felt bound by without fully understanding why. Figure 2 below illustrates the participants' perception of their one-dimensional path. Cyrus and Karim described it as a linear path, and Cyrus would argue with his school on "why everybody has to go down this path like sheep". Darius and Ismail described it as a road, and Darius explained how "everyone must race each other and try to get ahead". Nader likened his experience to a train track, and "once you are on it there is no getting off".

Figure 2

An Illustration of a Student's Life, Pre-University, Where Everyone Is Telling Them Where to Go and What to Do



Note. From *Innovation and The Herd Mentality*, by The Horizons Tracker, 2015 (https://adigaskell.org/2015/01/02/innovation-and-the-herd-mentality/) In the public domain.

5.2.3 A disconnect with higher education

A third aspect where the participants' experienced the misguidance and inaction that they felt further led them to the one-dimensional pathway and the shaping of their aspirations stemmed from an issue Karim identified: "another shortcoming that we have in Iran is we don't have any idea about majors at all". In addition to the participants' experience of misguidance from school and society, and the inaction by the State, the participants' unfamiliarity about different

university majors was also a result of the disconnect between schools and higher education. Irrespective of the type of high school, there was no connection to and/or from university. During this time of their life, the participants' stories depicted no university fairs, and no exchanges of information such as programs where they could visit universities or a representative from a university visiting their high school. Karim, for example, traveled to Sharif and stood outside the entrance with the hopes of finding a student willing to answer his questions. As Nader stated earlier, "I saw that everybody's trying to get in [Sharif], but not everyone can, so I thought something is going on there – even though I didn't know what – so I said sure, I'll go". Ismail never heard of the country's most popular and prestigious university until high school. Darius explained that, "I too [wanted to attend Sharif] because all the things instilled into us [was] that Sharif is the best university of the country, when I haven't even seen Sharif!" He went on to describe the negligence, in addition to the misguidance, from his school for the gifted:

> No one [wanted to] spend time on a student who was sloppy and see what he wants to offer with this sloppiness, which is what I was. No one has tried to take something out of my sloppiness which matches my sloppiness. They wanted to make everything regulated. This results in what? Someone who is sloppy is somehow unsuccessful in education, with the criteria from <u>their</u> measurements, you will always fall short […] The person who was weak became weaker and the one who is good became better. That is, no one tried to help those who are worse. […] The way they did help was they gave us a pamphlet [called] "education guidance" in which I answered [yes or no questions about different professions] to identify which [major] I like or don't like. But someone who doesn't know what accounting is, well, what does it mean to like it or not? *Darius*

Nader, on the other hand, who was always at the top of his class felt abandoned by the people around him because "they saw [he] was getting good grades, so they said he knows what he is doing". However, Nader was perplexed on what area of study he liked or disliked. Therefore, when the time came for him to choose his university major:

> I had not thought much about what major I would choose when the time came for me to choose a major. I don't know [why I didn't think about it], I was wrong. Back then nobody thought about this, yeah maybe it would have been better if I had thought about

> it back then … it was not yet that serious about what is going to be my job later. […] Some asked like "what is your interest", for example, "what do you love", and I used to say I don't know, I'm not interested in any of them or I don't know which one I love, this is why everybody said "choose [mechanical engineering] the majority is doing this as well" and I said okay let me do this too. *Nader*

When the time came for Karim, he was accepted into industrial engineering. He described how fortunate he became because although he knew very little about this field, he ended up liking his major – which he stressed was rare. Ismail had a different experience when deciding which university major to choose:

> Students who had very good GPAs and were among the top students in school were highly encouraged to go to mathematics [in university]. The [high school] counselors use to encourage the students to do this and students themselves tended to go as well. […] I chose [chemical engineering] because I liked it myself. I consulted with other people too. Some of them told me to choose computer engineering. For example, there was an institute which would charge you [money] to help choose your [university] major. I went there and talked to them. He looked at my [grades] and told me to choose computer engineering. He said, "do you like computer engineering? Select computer." I said, I'm picking [chemical engineering]. *Ismail*

I pressed the participants further on why they followed this one-dimensional path and did not resist against the State expectations that were shaping their aspirations in order to pursue their own path. Darius described his lack of self-confidence and motivation. He explained how he often required a push from friends and family to achieve many of his academic tasks and therefore followed his peers in obeying what school and society told them to do, and where to go. Nader spoke of his apathy in making decisions throughout his academic journey. He too followed his peers in obeying what school and society told them to do, and where to go, and later admitted the mistakes he made for not questioning the process and where it would lead him. As Darius and Nader recalled those moments in their young lives, they did not remember a moment where they felt compelled to seek the advice of someone/thing outside their educational institutions.

Cyrus, on the other hand, did question the one-dimensional path and tried to defy it, but was not strong enough to resist the educational and societal pressures from the people around him. Cyrus was the only participant who had the opportunity to enroll in different classes at his private school. With various programs running twelve months out of the year, he was able to discover what he liked and disliked. Although he admitted that none of his classes helped him make a decision, he did choose the university major he wanted (computer engineering) and not what his family tried to make him select (medicine). However, similar to the other participants, Cyrus detailed how his high school did not provide constructive counseling, guidance, and/or advice. Like Nader said, they did not ask him what he liked, they just told him what to major it. Mr. Sadiq had the same experience when he was a student, so when he later became a high school counselor he developed his approach to better assist students in discovering what discipline they desire to major in.

> The youth are pushed [away] from humanities towards the majors with jobs. […] I help them from three aspects. Look, it is a triangle, deciding about the future is a triangle, you probably are familiar with it naturally. [1] Your aptitude, meaning your capabilities. [2] Your interests, concerns, and aspirations. And [3] the circumstance, environmental conditions. Environmental conditions means what the working conditions are like. Can you work within them or not? [These are] completely external factors. The other two are internal. When the external conditions do not exist at all, an Iranian family – especially with the current economy – doesn't see any reason to send their kid to study [non-STEMM majors]. Even some engineering majors, like materials for example. *Mr. Sadiq, high school counselor*

Ismail somewhat resisted by dropping out of his pre-university year to study on his own for the *konkur*. Even though he pursued the same one-dimensional path as the other participants, Ismail chose to take this path while still unclear on where it may lead him. The participants' limited resolve to resist these pressures, misguidance, and inactions in order to explore their own aspirations and discover their own path suggests a type of mindset that goes beyond immaturity and ignorance to where they believed the path they were told to aspire for was their best and only option. The argument can be made that the participants – with the exception of Ismail

perhaps – did not push themselves to the extent in which they could in order to find the guidance they needed or make better informed decisions about their future vis-à-vis their major and university. However, the participants' described a tension between their own uncertainties versus State expectations to where their aspirations were shaped by their school system and the people in their lives – teachers, counselors, tutors, classmates, family, and strangers.

5.3 Creating the one-dimensional aspiration

The disconnect between high school and university, the misguidance or negligence from counselors and society, as well as the pull away from non-STEMM disciplines continued to push the participants down the one-dimensional path where they made underdeveloped decisions for their short-term goals and no decisions for their long-term goals. In other words, a culture was cultivated where the participants felt they were rarely taught different disciplines and were seldomly encouraged to explore and discover their interests. Nader's explanation was poignant:

> Nobody gave you any other option, they didn't suggest any other idea, they didn't say, "other than this path, there is another path". Everybody was in agreement that you have to choose this path that, no, I didn't even doubt like perhaps this isn't right, I mean from school, school deputy, teachers, school principal, everybody at school had this view, at home everybody had this view, our relatives all had this view. I mean there was no place to doubt, like perhaps I should choose music or play soccer. I don't know, there was no place to even think about these. Everybody told me you will go to Sharif and after that you will either apply or there will be a good job for you […] we were in this path that we had to take the konkur and then go to university. *Nader*

With thought processes like, "nobody gave you any other option", "there was no place to doubt", "everybody is in agreement", "there was no place to even think", and "everybody told you", the singular path the participants felt they were told to take as well as the aspirations they felt they were told to have created another tension with their own academic – and eventual professional – maturation.

This struggle highlights a possible systemic issue where society and the education system manifested and perpetuated the socially accepted norms while the State passively ignored calls for change and the *khodi* actively opposed change. The participants believed that the mentality that there was only a one-dimensional option of passing through the *konkur* and enrolling in a top university in order to secure a successful life set them up for failure because they felt unable to think about their professional aspirations, explore alternative avenues to success, discover their own interests or passions, or attempt to plan for the long-term future.

With the exception of Cyrus and Ismail, who knew what discipline they wanted to major in (computer and chemical engineering) and what kind of career it should lead to, the other three participants felt uncertain about their academic decisions and unclear about the career it could lead to. Darius chose mechanical engineering through a process of negation. Nader followed the trend in selecting mechanical engineering. Karim was offered industrial engineering due to the rejections he received in electrical and mechanical engineering – which his family made him apply for. During a significant portion of their pre-university lives, these three gentlemen considered themselves multi-dimensional. However, they pushed these aspirations aside to focus on the *konkur*. The participants thought about nothing else because they were told and eventually believed that disciplines such as art or sports would not lead them to a successful life. Karim explained:

> One of the things that pressured kids in childhood was … that in school they look at things one dimensionally […and] it won't be useful if you go to sports, "you are not a normal member of society" or "you are not accepted by us". [This] was implanted in my mind by family and the society. *Karim*

Nader also mentioned on multiple occasions that he regretted not pursuing football but stressed that he did not dwell on it because there was nothing he could do to change it and he had to focus on his future.

Although each of the participants described the above in their own way, it was Karim who first used the term one-dimensional when discussing his experiences after failing the gifted school exam and attending public school:

> You [are] somehow labelled in [high school]. They call it, هنگ شدن, or being controlled, you just focus on one thing and think … you frame your mind and think you are not gifted, they tell you from the beginning that you have lost the game, from the beginning that you want to start. This is extremely bad, meaning it distances you from that space. […] In my opinion, the ones around you are much more influential because a child…during middle school … the kid hasn't really formed a personality. How ever you are raised is how you will end up. I feel the force at this phase is a lot! […] this one-dimensionality has become very embedded in society, specifically in education where families don't have any perspective. We even have a lot of proverbs in our culture, things like, پاتو از گیلیمت درازتر نکن [which translates to: "know your limits and do not exceed them", "stay back, do not cross this line which is none of your business", or "you are not eligible for doing something in this subject"]. I want to say some subconscious thoughts are affecting us, ok?, that we are not aware of. These are dictating some kind of one-dimensionality in us from childhood. *Karim*

One aspect of Karim's story that was intriguing was his description that "subconscious thoughts was affecting me that I was unaware of; thoughts that were dictating some kind of one-dimensionality from childhood". The participants described such an experience, as well as the moment in their lives (during within-university – which will be discussed in the next chapter) when they realized this one-dimensionality. What was fascinating was not only their ability to overcome their sense of despair after realizing what they have been told their entire young lives was misleading or inaccurate, but also their self-awareness to not solely blame the institutions and people around them. In speaking with the stakeholders, they appreciated the criticisms the participants directed towards school, society, and the State because as Dr. Hossain (stakeholder, Sharif Industrial Engineering professor) explained it, "if they had made these decisions themselves, they should bear the responsibility, but because it was others [saying] what to do they [participants] become like a machine". Simultaneously, however, they argued that if the participants truly wanted to realize their aspirations they could if they tried hard enough. When I returned to the participants with these comments they would first react by

unconditionally blaming everyone and everything around them. However, after calming down, the participants did acknowledge their own shortcomings – which will be expounded upon in chapter seven.

5.3.1 Unhealthy competition

Another aspect of the one-dimensionality the participants relived was the intense and unhealthy competition for the best grades, the best schools, the best *konkur* rankings, and the best universities. Three issues emerged as a result. First, an individualist disposition increased within them that they later had to unlearn when trying to succeed in their jobs. Second, these aspirations reinforced the one-dimensional mentality that this was the only path to a guaranteed successful life; and therefore, their aspirations were being formed for them. One significant absence in the participants' narratives was society or school discussing life after university. Third, public school students, like Karim and Ismail, were essentially forgotten. Similar neglect was also found in the experiences of Darius' sloppiness and Nader's label of being too intelligent. Furthermore, the proverb Karim stated above (know your limits and do not exceed them) emphasized this exclusion. The same can be said for Cyrus, for when he had an opportunity to think outside of the one-dimensional path he did not:

> **Cyrus**: I mean when you are at school, all the teachers tell you that you should study mathematics. Counselors tell you the same. Your family tells you the same. The society tells you the same. Your relatives tell you the same. They say, "shouldn't you study mathematics?" Your friends tell you the same too. Everyone means literally everyone, with no exception.
>
> **Reza**: Did you discover anything about what you liked from your other courses?
>
> **Cyrus**: Yeah, but it wasn't like … I wouldn't choose my future job based on these. For example, I learnt carpentry. I had this idea then that an engineer who knows carpentry is way better than an engineer who doesn't know carpentry. So let me learn it. An engineer who… [Reza: In your high school?] Yeah, in secondary school.
>
> **Reza:** During secondary school you thought about being an engineer?
>
> **Cyrus:** Yeah, I was thinking about it, there was no other options. We were supposed to be either engineers or doctors since the first grade of elementary school.

As a gifted student, Darius' one-dimensional path was also set:

> The path was set for me. They have made everything one-dimensional by limiting it to only one path […] What is taking place is that we in this [educational] framework were "good kids". "Good kids" are always expected to do the right thing. And what is the right thing? What [subject] are you good in? Your grade is best in which [subject]? You go there… then when you get to the konkur, when it gets to choosing the [university] major, this is repeated again. You got a good rank, so what is the right thing? Choosing this major. It is not good to choose another [major]. Even for example, if somebody with my rank chooses another major, for example management at University of Tehran, it is not good! He has made a mistake! As if this person has committed a deadly sin! Well, this is something that subconsciously occurs in our minds. We were not able to think about anything other than what they forced us to do …well… as long as we were going to school. I mean … we didn't see anything except konkur! I mean, you won't believe it, but when you enter pre-university level, everyone is studying for the konkur! You don't see one person who does something else and thinks about something else. This issue… this culture is so dominant that you are sure nothing is possible except with this [path] and that causes the minds to be limited. […] The interesting point is that even if you do well in that aspect, you don't have a great chance of being successful. But a student is not allowed to explore otherwise. *Darius*

The frustration in Darius' voice as he recalled those moments was upsetting. He felt he grew up in a system where he could not think about anything beyond what was in front of him. And what was in front of him was his aspirations being formed with its own limitations and stipulations. According to the participants, and as Darius explained, school and society were only interested in keeping them on a one-dimensional path and anything counter to this was a mistake, "a sin". It seemed it was of little concern to them what these young men's professional aspirations were, or if this pathway was what they wanted. This further raises questions on whether the State enabled these socially accepted norms to persist throughout schools, considering the highly-centralized structure of Iran's education system.

This enabling and persistence appeared to be further compounded by a cultural manifestation of societal norms that reminded the participants of the one-dimensional aspiration and uncertainty about their own long-term future and professional aspirations. Cyrus spoke about this culture:

> The school did something to us that we weren't friends anymore, I mean I didn't consider my classmates as friends, I saw them as competitors – the school did this – so much emphasis was put on our scores and ratings, I mean I killed myself to get better scores than my friends and this didn't make us sympathetic and empathetic, this made us competitors. And if I knew something, I wouldn't help my friend. I said, what if he learns it and gets ahead of me? Let me keep this to myself so I can stay ahead of him. That was awful! I mean it was one of the most ridiculous things in school, and this wasn't just us, most schools were like this. The culture and common sense are so low that if you want to do teamwork you will face hostility and competition, I mean it is the culture … they teach you the wrong culture. *Cyrus*

This "wrong culture" with a low common sense that Cyrus referred to also illustrated the resistance to change that Karim spoke of regarding the professor who was forced to retire after challenging Sharif's president. Or Darius' example of a Ministry advisor who was invited from Imperial College to help improve certain areas of the country but later fled Iran after being harassed because of the changes he aimed to implement. Or Dr. Mahdi (stakeholder, a government official from a ministry office) admitting there was significant resistance to change from those in power in either the State or the *khodi*. Also, a professor from a university in Tehran who had lived through every major event in Iran since the 1950's explaining that "you either have to become like them or quietly live your life". He elaborated that the *khodi* – primarily consisting of individuals within or devoted to the State – had built a system it did not want to change, nor did it want to give up power. Therefore, it only allowed people to enter its domain, or make changes, who thought the way they did and believed in what they did – essentially having the same ideology – while everyone else should not disrupt this system and just live a "quiet life". Darius' further depiction of this culture and quiet life – where he previously described "committing a sin" if you do not follow the path you were told – began with the completion of a to-do-list:

> If you don't check these boxes, your life will not start […] I just knew that the reason for getting good grades is to be in a good place in that competition […] the story is that I had a mental idea in my mind when I was going to school which that mental idea was not hammered out correctly in all aspects. I mean it had some things that did not connect to reality and was not very real and because of that, I had no well-developed idea, I

> mean no real thing had been shown to me stating that "if you want to become a mechanical engineer, it is in this way." *Darius*

5.3.2 Unable to aspire for the future

A prime example of the participants' inability to aspire for the future comes from the dichotomous way Ismail was simultaneously effective and frail in exercising his agency to that pursuit. While the other participants, like Darius, "were not able to think about anything other than what they forced us to do […] as long as we were going to school", Ismail broke away from that by dropping out of his final year of high school to prepare for the *konkur*. However, he continued down the same one-dimensional path as the other participants, in trying to rank high on the exam and gain admissions into a top-tier university. Simultaneously, Ismail never planned or thought about his long-term future or professional aspirations. On the one hand, he understood the magnitude of his decision – which was scorned by the people around him – but was not prudent in his long-term strategy. He explained that, at the time, he chose to wait until university to decide about his future but later regretted not exploring his options.

Nader also did not think about his future or professional aspirations, but not because he chose to, but rather because he was unaware of what he was interested in. He followed what society and school told him to do and fell into the one-dimensional pathway. After accomplishing every academic milestone that was expected from him in order to reach that successful life he was promised, Nader was still searching for his aspirations while confused about his future:

> I had this problem that I didn't know what I liked […] and no one would help me find out what I like. I also said this in the first interview, that one of the problems that I had, and still do, and I think is really damaging me in my life, is that I don't know what I like. I have not yet been able to really find out the thing that I am interested in, for example, something for which I would be motivated every day to go after. *Nader*

While Nader was achieving short-term success, he felt neglected. As a result of the absence of a support structure that could have helped him determine what disciplines he liked or disliked,

he continued through his pre-university years unable to aspire for the future. During our interviews, he sometimes reached certain realizations and admitted he made mistakes, and once said he hoped our conversations would "help me discover what I like, but if not, at least your research can help future students like me".

While Karim and Ismail experienced neglect because they were labeled as unintelligent, and Nader was neglected because he was too intelligent, Darius was neglected for his "sloppiness", as he put it. However, he made it through this first stage on his own, despite his school labelling him irresponsible:

> I got the third rank at our school [89th overall] in the konkur which if you asked my ninth-grade teacher, he could not imagine such a thing … some people were formerly known from before [as top students] because they were supposed to get good [grades], and they did anyway. I was not in these estimations. *Darius*

Considering how he was neglected, I asked him if there was ever something he preferred to do but those around him said, "no don't do it". He answered:

> It was somehow even a level higher, that we were not even able to think about it […] it was not very much clear in that time [what was important for me]. Do you know that for a child in Iran who studies at school they tell him that life starts after university. You should pass a routine process, after that you start living. I mean, you know, they frequently postpone living. When your future is unimagined, you are unable to think about it. *Darius*

Darius' lived experience of a "routine process" where life was postponed until after university, thus resulting in an unimagined future highlights the struggles the participants' experienced in being unable to explore their professional aspirations and therefore continued with the one-dimensional pathway that school and society had pushed on them. Karim described his interpretation differently and proposed a way out:

> You have to take control of your life, the dictation of society and the mind barriers that it instills in you and the labels that are given to you, won't be important to you anymore. But when you are not aware, those mind barriers are always there, you won't ever become an initiator, you'll always be waiting for others to tell you what to do, so you are a puppet in others' hands. […] You have to have courage not to become like

> everybody else. […] courage to get out of that comfort zone, and embrace punishment, embrace the punishment from society and family. […] you have to embrace the punishment, be strong to think long term that I'll show them in four years that my path was right. *Karim*

While Karim's assessment was consequential in not only his, but the other participants' ability to overcome such mind barriers, dictations, and labels, his long-term vision during pre-university was actually a mid-term vision which further highlights the barriers he later admitted he had to overcome. Thus, similar to Ismail, Karim also exhibited a dichotomous proclivity toward his effectiveness and frailty in exercising his agency. It appeared that with Ismail and Karim, they at least had a rudimentary awareness of their own abilities – which may be accredited to their public school experience and being labeled unintelligent and subsequently neglected, and thus left to persevere on their own. However, throughout that journey, they felt unable to aspire for the future.

Furthermore, the sense of not being an initiator and "waiting for others to tell you what to do" was reminiscent of the experiences of Nader, Darius, and Cyrus. Neither of these three gentlemen exited their comfort zone nor thought of their long term plans, goals, or aspirations:

> The long term was not conceivable for us … for us to think long term I mean. For a few years our dream was just to take the konkur and get a good ranking. No one paid attention to afterwards. Since the first grade of elementary school we were supposed to be either engineers or doctors. For years the konkur was our only dream and if we crossed that bridge that's it, the world will be our oyster. These thoughts were instilled in us, and it was all a lie. *Cyrus*

Thus, the focus on making it past this first stage, but only through a one-dimensional pathway prevented the participants from exploring their future and professional aspirations inside Iran.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I set out the findings in relation to the first part of the research question – how have Sharif graduates' professional aspirations been shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences? The school system and society within this first

stage obstructed the participants' exploration of their own individual aspirations by pressuring them down a specific path that was one-dimensional. With barriers that labelled, misguided, and neglected the participants, a pathway was established for them to focus on standardized tests, schools for the gifted, *konkur* rankings, top-tier universities, and an engineering (or medicine) degree. As a result, the participants reported experiencing their aspirations being formed for them. And while robust debates on these problems were prevalent, the State was identified as ostensibly enabling such barriers to exist due to the highly-centralized structure of Iran's education system. One of the outcomes of pursuing the one-dimensional aspiration was not realizing one's own professional aspirations. I worked through these encounters between the participants and their school system, society, and the people in their lives.

In section one the participants described how they felt Iran's education system working against them in trying to explore their own individual aspirations, while in its absence, creating their aspirations for them. They described how school curriculum was disproportionately focused on teaching students the State's ideology instead of offering a variety of classes to expand their minds and explore their options. Simultaneously, schools and society minimized the importance of discovering their aspirations and interests. Rather, a fixation was placed on the *konkur*. This was exacerbated by the *mafia*'s, or *khodi*'s, persistence in magnifying the *konkur*'s grandeur for monetary gains. Moreover, the participants felt that these institutions and actors pushed them towards a one-dimensional mentality that made them short-sighted in their planning and convinced that life did not begin until after graduating with a bachelors. As Darius explained it, "they frequently postponed living".

Section two detailed the participants' description of why they felt school and society did not help them in discovering what their interests were in order to determine what course of action to take regarding their academic trajectory and increase probability in realizing their aspirations. The participants described the neglect or misguidance they perceived from their

school and particularly their guidance counselor, but also highlighted their own immaturities and ignorance to just following what they were told. The assistance the participants believed they received was primarily based on their *konkur* ranking and which university and major they were most likely to gain admissions. This underdeveloped counseling infrastructure led to uncertainty about the participants' plans and future while continuing down a one-dimensional path. This also demonstrated how society had perpetuated this culture to exist while the State seemingly enabled it to continue. Finally, the participants discussed how the isolated nature of schools from universities added to their difficulties in exploring not only their aspirations but the major they liked and the university they wanted to attend.

In section three the participants discussed how their schools pushed them in becoming one-dimensional. In other words, the participants' sole focus during this first stage was ranking high on the *konkur* and gaining acceptance into a top-tier university. The participants recounted growing up in a school system where they believed they could not think about anything beyond what was in front of them, and what was in front of them came with its own limitations and stipulations. First, they must follow a pathway with three (but not limited to) milestones: (1) the gifted school exam, (2) the Olympiad exam, and (3) the *konkur* exam. Second, they must prevail at these milestones in order to ensure their life was guaranteed to be successful. However, irrespective of their successes or failures, they felt pushed towards a one-dimensional mentality. If they passed these milestones, they felt labelled as a gifted student and pressured to major in a STEMM program and attend a university like Sharif. If they failed, they felt labelled as unintelligent, neglected, but still pushed towards the *konkur* because the human capital mentality couched within the one dimensional pathway was the only path to success. Either way, the participants did not feel encouraged to contemplate their future, thus remaining oblivious about their professional aspirations. As a result, they felt their individual aspirations

and agency had yet to begin to take shape. Instead of discussing options and debating scenarios about their future, they were told not to think or worry about their future.

The following vignettes from Karim and Nader's experiences and perceptions summarized the participants' pre-university experiences and how they believed their professional aspirations were being shaped for them. With Karim's vignette, there was a strong sense of determination and purpose from his part that was constantly circumscribed by the people around him and led to his subsequent complaisance. With Nader's vignette, there was a strong sense of uncertainty coupled with unsure regret.

> I want … I want to take the gifted exam! "You failed, you're stupid, go to this school." Ok. I want to take the Olympiad exam! "No. You're at this school, take these classes." Ok. I want to compete in swimming! "It's irrelevant, it's a waste, focus on studying." Ok. I want to take the konkur! "You'll fail … You passed!? Go to this university." Ok. I want to study this subject! "What's your score? Study this major." Ok. What future will this give me? "Don't worry about it." Ok… *Karim*

> What if … What if I knew what to do? "Do this." I mean, what if I knew what I liked? What if I knew where to go? "Go here." I mean, what if I knew where to find my way? What if I knew who to ask? "Ask us." I mean, what if I knew who could help me? What if I could do it all over again? What if … no, this is the only way. *Nader*

The tension between the participants and their school system was evident in the way they narrated their aspirations being shaped for them by their teachers and counselors. This tension is juxtaposed with the participants also trying to contemplate alternative ideas of their aspirations that eventually became worn away by the societal discourse and the participants' tension with the manifestation of that discourse – i.e., the people in their lives, and the State's tentacles of influence: media and entertainment outlets, the *konkur mafia,* and the *khodi*. What resides in the absence of the participants' aspirational agency is an internalized manifestation of the one-dimensional pathway. As a result, the differentiation between State expectations and individual aspirations became blurred. The participants continued down the one-dimensional pathway, remaining uncertain about their future. They wondered why they had to follow this

one-dimensional path, where it would lead them, would it be as successful as they were promised, did they even want to move in this direction, and why were there no other paths to take?

Chapter 6. Within-university: Reinforced aspirations

This chapter consists of two sections. In section one I detail the participants' tension with the higher education system that they felt was working against them. I then present the participants' narrative surrounding a concept that illustrates how the one-dimensional pathway continued to persist within-university with the State enabling that persistence. This concept was *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi*. In short, the *khodi* constituted any individual/entity who had any kind of affiliation, directly or indirectly, with the State – i.e., Sharif University, which was owned by the State. And the *ghayre-khodi* was everyone else – particularly the five participants. The participants described five experiences as a result of their tension with the *khodi*: (1) a sense of hopelessness towards society and the institutions they had to navigate; (2) the pressure to leave Iran; (3) an inaction from the top-down and bottom-up for change; (4) misguidance from the people in their lives as the participants tried to navigate the parameters they felt were limiting their academic and professional maturation; and (5) a disconnect between Sharif and the job market. In section two I detail how the participants' uncertainty about their future was compounded by their struggles to distance themselves from the one-dimensional pathway while simultaneously trying to identify their own aspirations and find ways to manifest their agency and employability to an extent where they have an increased likelihood in realizing their aspirations inside the limited parameters of Iran. I close the chapter by briefly highlighting two issues – the *sarbazi* and the economy – that added to the participants' struggles in shaping their own aspirations as well as the increased tension with the State and *khodi* as they transitioned into the job market.

6.1 Tensions with Sharif University

The participants were mindful of being fair in telling their story – often stressing their avoidance of categorical statements and acknowledging alternative views and exceptions to

their examples. I did notice, however, that their emotions got the best of them at times, and their tone became more accusatory towards Sharif, society, the government, the State, and the people around them. In those moments, I gave the participants the opportunity to speak freely and uninterrupted because I believed there was truth within their stories even if they were bias at times. Also, the participants' ability to speak for one hour straight showed a sense of suppressed anger, I believe, because of the limited outlets afforded to them in expressing their frustrations. The example of Sharif's popularity and high rank resulting from its students rather than its professors was one of those occasions. As the conversations progressed, however, I discovered that the participants' view on this matter was not isolated squarely on the argument that students, not professors, made Sharif elite or popular. There was a compilation of issues on how Sharif operated that they believed continued to limit the parameters in which they could academically mature, which subsequently continued to shape their professional aspirations.

Each participant expressed many issues regarding Sharif, and there were four commonly shared issues among, at least, four of the participants. First, professors focused more on publishing than teaching. Nader talked about how some professors publish an article every two weeks: "some of the professors have become an article submitting factory. And then these articles, like I said is a philosophical discussion, it has no correlation with the industry's needs." This connected with the second issue, professors were disinterested in engaging with their industry and preferred to focus on the academics of their discipline. Ismail recalled professors explicitly stating that they did not care about the job market. Third, professors taught outdated material and/or simply reused previous semesters' syllabi. One example that was ubiquitous throughout the interviews was that the teachings were heavy on theory – another example of a disconnect with the industry needs. Fourth, professors had no interest in helping their students – either, academically, professionally, or personally – even when they were assigned as advisors. For example, Nader and Karim remembered how professors "did not reply to our hellos", "they did

not see us as humans". Nader recounted having to track down his advisor somewhere off campus to have him sign his class schedule and how his advisor did not care what classes he was taking.

Because the participants were careful in being fair in telling their story, they also provided favorable examples as well. Such as, academic departments and/or professors that were more judicious in helping and preparing their students throughout their bachelors as well as beyond. Cyrus mentioned how his department (computer engineering) had strong connections with the industry which led to high employment rates for its graduates. His department's internship program was the envy of other departments because (a) "the students' actually learned something", and (b) there was at a stronger possibility of getting hired afterwards. Nader skipped over his bachelors (mechanical engineering) and spoke of his MBA department (at Sharif) hiring practitioners with first-hand knowledge they acquired from their work experience. He also spoke of his department being well connected with the industry and providing ample opportunities for employment. Darius and Karim, who later pursued their MBA at another university, did not share the same sentiment. However, Karim did recall one semester when his department (industrial engineering) had a visiting professor from Canada:

> I picked that class, I was like maybe his knowledge is more up to date. Then he brought the mathematical models of the real projects that he was doing in hospitals and taught them to us. We were like well we know all this, but we didn't know what they were good for. When you understand how [what you're learning] effects your work, where is you major useful, it extremely motivates you, it extremely motivates you. *Karim*

As the participants provided these positive examples they, again, gravitated back to the negative side – which did monopolize their overall narrative. Thus, even these examples came with caveats. Primarily, positive change within Sharif was very difficult to achieve. Karim detailed an example:

> One of the physics lecturers […] one of the decorated professors of Sharif. He studied at Berkley. He himself at his own expense had bought and brought books, meaning not on behalf of the government, himself had purchased all the books from abroad, himself…then had so much criticism that … don't … these (laughs) … I mean don't spread this {I can stop this if you want} no I'll say it, there's no problem, they gave him mandatory retirement. He use to criticize the university's conditions, it's philosophy and policies, and they retired him. This is again one of those … instead of using the criticism … when the vice-chancellor is sensing criticism they retired him … he was invited to a discussion regarding university policies, and which way the university is headed. He challenged the vice-chancellor in a debate. And a month later … he is retired all of a sudden. It's pretty clear. I mean you can see the one-dimensionality even on the highest levels of Sharif still exists. Instead of learning from our failures and use them … we don't learn from failure at all, it's as if someone who criticizes us wants to replace us, he wants to undermine our position. Instead of using the criticism, which is genuinely compassionate, one of the best professors of Sharif, in the world, he is extremely good, but he has been chastised. *Karim*

Thus, this example – as well as the ones provided above – confirmed for the participants that Sharif University was not only working against them but also working against anyone whose academic/professional intentions went counter to the socially accepted norms. In other words, the participants did not feel alone in their pursuit in trying to manifest their agency while simultaneously discovering the extent to which they are allowed to enact their own agency had a limit within State parameters and the State's tentacles of influence – i.e., the *khodi*, governmental agencies, mass media, and religious organizations. Moreover, the participants explained that if certain professors were denied opportunities to accomplish their aspirations – particularly in a university that they felt was professor-centered – then their own chances of realizing their aspirations were even more bleak.

Therefore, the participants' within-university stories of lacking significant support structures for their maturation as higher education students within and throughout the academic environment, or as transitionary graduates in pursuit of identifying their professional aspirations left them to navigate this journey on their own. As the years passed, the participants increasingly felt the need to become self-reliant and sought assistance elsewhere in their pursuit towards identifying and realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran. On the one hand,

the participants felt abandoned and discouraged because of the broken promises during pre-university of following the path to Sharif in order to reach a successful life. On the other hand, they continued to strategize ways they could reach that successful life.

However, the participants were increasingly realizing that there were certain parameters they had to stay within in order to accomplish a certain level of success. This also coincided with their experience of the one-dimensional pathway. In addition to the frustration from such a realization, there was one added issue the participants discovered during their within-university time that was troubling: leave their country. The participants calculated that the degree of success they would be able to accomplish inside Iran by staying within the parameters was considerably incomplete, unethical, or illegal when compared to the degree of success they could potentially achieve in a developed democracy or a country where the country's government or State is relatively more fluid and open to change – like Western nations – and with fewer limitations on their citizens. The participants did not plan, nor wanted to leave Iran during the within-university stage of their lives. They also recognized that going abroad had its own complications. However, the opportunities it offered appeared much greater than what they perceived inside Iran, and thus worth the risk. When I challenged them on this assumption, they argued that the exceptions I may find further supported the rule they were arguing.

6.1.1 A *khodi* vs *ghayre-khodi* tension in Sharif

One key architect of the tension the participants felt and the one-dimensional aspirations they continued to experience was the *khodi*. The participants' experienced the *khodi* within Sharif. Particularly since Sharif belongs to the State, which means its employees are essentially hired by different branches of the government – or individuals within the *khodi*. Therefore, this tension between the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* was not only visible in the participants' relationship with Sharif and its faculty and staff, but also between the faculty. The participants

referred to the *khodi* as the *mafia* when discussing the individuals who benefited from societal norms, Sharif's status quo, and resistance to change:

> Most [professors] have created a monopoly in different departments. I mean, they have created a kind of mafia which won't allow other professors to do anything […] In the mechanical engineering department … there is something like a mafia which doesn't allow new professors to work easily unless they are accepted in their group based on the existing regulations ... a professor came there and he taught us for one semester and I took his class. He said that he couldn't … I mean, with those conditions and the mafia that existed there, he said that he couldn't finish [teaching] and he went to University of Tehran and became a professor there. *Darius*

I asked Darius what those regulations were. For example, if seniority or age played a factor, if he had to abide by a particular curriculum, or perhaps his ideological beliefs given that Sharif belonged to the State. Although Darius could not speak to the specifics, what he did know was fascinating:

> Our problem is that with the current educational system that exists here, we don't gain many sources of knowledge in order to make change happen. Because, for example, the universities here are old in some ways … they are outdated. They don't have modern and updated majors…the majors that we really need are not that strong, and the professors who are there are not that good. They are the people who have been developed in this system and now are back in the same system. I mean, it is linked to its own end and that is why it is like a cycle which is going down instead of being developed. *Darius*

The system that Darius was referring to initially had its roots in the State. As detailed in chapter two, in 1980 the Islamic Republic closed all universities in order to change text books, subject matter, curriculum, and faculty to be in alignment with the State's ideology (Mahdi, 1999). However, the culture of that system was eventually inculcated by the newly appointed professors and administrators of Sharif, who years later came to embody the *mafia* or *khodi* that the participants had experienced.

Because Sharif is a part of the State, "the people who have been developed in this system and now are back in the same system" – as Darius explained – had gone through some form of a

vetting process and had agreed to certain regulations. And any scenario contrary to this had proven difficult for some of the professors considered as *ghayre-khodi*:

> You don't stand a chance for some [positions] that you want ... for example for … even some … universities have a selection process for employing professors and only certain people can get it. […] My MBA [at Sharif] we have a professor who is depressed, unfortunately. She is a single woman who has come back from the U.S. and she seemed very upset during the entire year when we got to know her. She said that she would go to the U.S. to stay with her brother. […] One of my professors [in Mechanical Engineering] said that he is going on sabbatical for six months. He never came back. He went to the U.S. and became a professor there and never came back. *Darius*

The point the participants were trying to make was a counter argument to those – like some of the stakeholders (Dr. Sajjad) – who told them that their ability (or inability) in identifying and realizing their professional aspirations had little-to-nothing to do with what kind of university Sharif was or should have been. Rather, it depended on the individual, their agency, and use of capital. However, when certain professors left Sharif and those vacancies were conceivably filled with "people who have been developed in this system" then the status quo continues to persist. The State subsequently enables this culture to persist, and the *mafia* to exist, which creates a tension between the participants and Sharif because as the participants continued to navigate through these parameters of higher education in order to try to identify their own professional aspirations they felt pressured into continuing on the one-dimensional pathway from pre-university.

I discussed this with five Sharif professors (of the thirteen stakeholders): Dr. Ali (MBA department), Dr. Hassan (Industrial Engineering), Dr. Hossain (Industrial Engineering), Dr. Sajjad (Computer Engineering), and Dr. Baqir (Air and Space Engineering). Four of them (not Dr. Sajjad) confirmed that there were professors that made it difficult to achieve change and help their students, which essentially was "setting them up for failure" as they put it. They referred to these professors as the "revolution generation" (of 1979). Dr. Sajjad was from that generation and disagreed with the participants' depiction of the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi*, and

their tension within Sharif. Moreover, one Government Official (Dr. Mahdi, another stakeholder) within a Ministry of the Islamic Republic, explained that for the most part, Sharif University (as well as Iran's higher education system) was working against the participants, either actively through the *mafia*'s resistance to change, or passively from other governmental bodies' disregard on calls for change:

> These entities work very slowly and are resistant to change, and in most cases don't allow change to happen [...] A top-down approach will not lead to change and will only be frustrating and disappointing. Take me as an example, I've learned the hard way that going through the government is fruitless or difficult. *Dr. Mahdi*

Thus, similar to the participants' experiences during pre-university, the participants described how the people in Sharif and society would tell them what choices to make, what path to take, and "not to worry about the future". The participants believed it was of no interest to those around them what their own professional aspirations were. This tension between the participants and the people around them, in particular the *khodi*, intensified as the participants matured and slowly identified their own aspirations. This tension during their within-university time manifested in four ways for the participants, starting with hopelessness.

6.1.1.1 Hopeless

The participants were beginning to construct from their experiences that there was a set of parameters regarding the extent to which a *Sharifi* – specifically a *ghayre-khodi Sharifi* – is able to exert his agency. Also, according to the stories about some of their professors, there appeared to be repercussions if one attempted to go beyond the *khodi* defined parameters – which were essentially set by the State due to the highly-centralized structure of Iran's education system. The participants' explained how "you can only try so much before hitting a ceiling". Thus, the participants felt that if certain professors were unable to accomplish their professional aspirations because of this tension then what hope was there for them. The existence of this tension for the participants removed the hope for the possibility that Sharif

could have made improvements to potentially help them as they moved into the job market – especially considering the volatility of the country's economy due to sanctions, corruption, inflation, and poor policies.

> [Y]ou shouldn't get your hopes up about the university and this country. […] In an academic environment, when a professor looks out for you, it is effective because you are in that system and … about the planning [for your future] that you mentioned I concluded that Iran has far more problems than we were thinking. And you might see its reflection in the students who enter the university in the sense that they are really active, cheerful, and lively at the beginning…of course it's closely linked to their young age too. They aspire to do big things, but at the end of their studies, they are just so, weary (laugh). Yeah, most of them, I think are people who are too tired … to make any changes. In my opinion, it's important. I think the university has made them this way. If the university had a good environment, these people would have been in better conditions at the end. *Ismail*

This experience by Ismail – as well as Nader, Darius, and Karim – demonstrated how being a part of the system and having relationships with the *khodi* can situate one to acquire certain advantages. According to the participants, anything contrary to this and one could find oneself continuing to follow the one-dimensional pathway, which perpetuated the tension and elicited hopelessness in the participants.

Cyrus' frustration with this sense of hopelessness towards Sharif permeated even more than the other participants. He explained that the hopelessness was not just because of the resistance and/or inaction from the top-down – vis-à-vis, policy proposals, education reform, amendments to laws, and institutional changes – but also bottom-up change did not occur because people chose to leave Iran rather than stay and try to improve living standards.

> [W]e are basically producing students and giving them to America, and this is the height of catastrophe. Everybody comes here and studies and basically we don't use them in this country. Like I said most of the students who were studying computer with me are not in Iran, they are all in America. We are practically training a workforce for America. All these expenses for America to use. The best, the most elite, and the most educated, we prepare them and give them to America. This is the <u>catastrophe</u> of Sharif! I <u>detest</u> it. Nobody stayed, I am doing something here but it's a bad feeling. *Cyrus*

Nevertheless, the participants rejected the feeling of hopelessness and quickly adapted to their environment, finding extracurricular activities and motivation to accomplish different goals in different environments. However, in addition to the limitations on enacting their agency, and fighting off feelings of hopelessness, an added tension of whether or not to leave their country entered the participants' navigations.

6.1.1.2 Leaving Iran

The participants had no intention of leaving Iran during their time at Sharif. They aspired to contribute towards the betterment of society but were unclear on how to identify what that would be and how to realize it. Not only did the participants feel that Sharif ill-prepared them for life after graduation, it also cultivated an atmosphere where *Sharifis* were dominated by this obligation that they had to leave because of the limiting parameters they were allowed to navigate by the *khodi*. The participants were advised, and at times bombarded by people throughout society and Sharif, to leave Iran which adversely occupied their thoughts.

> From the fifty who entered the university with me in the same year just two people stayed in Iran. That is because there are no foundations to help each other, and everyone leaves. All are seeking to leave, all are thinking about leaving, madly … and it causes those who stay to even feel connected with the purpose of leaving, so we get entangled, that is, you cannot do anything … it's a very strange place to be. *Darius*

Darius struggled the most on whether he should leave during this time of his life. He even haphazardly applied in his final year because he saw the people around him were applying, but he was not accepted. He mentioned on numerous occasions that because "everyone leaves, you feel indebted to yourself if you don't go". Then when he (thought he) decided to stay and wanted to transition a class project into a startup, he failed:

> We had a motorcycle project … we had relative achievements. We later tried a little to progress it as a startup company … but failed due to many reasons … we were not able to say collectively we are doing this. Since one wanted to apply and one wanted to be a physician. Because of this, they weren't interested in making any changes as big as we can. They all were thinking to safely pass the process which has been formerly defined for them. For example, the one who applied, I started thinking of applying too

> late and could not actually do anything; that is, working was not even an option in my mind for a significant period of time. We said we should apply; we should study and apply. Because of that the work we were doing was not deliberate and substantial, it didn't have a future leaning outlook. No one had any concern to start a job or to do entrepreneurship … it progressed in so many ways that we saw that salvation is in applying […] the atmosphere in the university … all the students … they all say that this is probably the way to salvation which means that you don't have any better options. *Darius*

Thus, not only did Darius feel unable to identify his professional aspirations, he also struggled with the distinction of which aspirations were his own – like contributing towards the betterment of society – and which aspirations were societal or State constructs – like going abroad. For Cyrus, the constant push to leave was more of a nuisance than a bewilderment and indecision:

> **Reza**: Did you feel that there was pressure on you that you had to apply?
>
> **Cyrus:** No, everybody applied, and I thought about it as well, but there wasn't a pressure on me, like an obligation … no
>
> **Reza:** So the fact that everybody wanted to apply, or everybody was applying…
>
> **Cyrus:** I felt like "why aren't I doing it?" But my life priorities were so much, that I didn't feel an obligation, I had so many priorities that I didn't think about it. I know that those who are going are not necessarily happier than I am.
>
> **Reza:** But this exists? This culture, if we can call it that, in Sharif…
>
> **Cyrus:** Everybody comes [to Sharif] to leave, people come to Sharif to go to America
>
> **Reza:** Do you think others, those outside of Sharif, do they expect you to leave?
>
> **Cyrus:** <u>Yes</u>! Anyone I talk to … right here [pointing at his job], the first question they asked was "why didn't you go to America", why didn't you leave, not America, "why didn't you leave", everybody asks this question, "you studied computer engineering at Sharif why are you here?"

Ismail, and Karim also experienced the nuisance of people insisting that leaving Iran was the best choice:

> A scary amount [expect you to apply and leave] … the youth and even more from society, they kept saying "why don't you go? why don't you go? why don't you go?" it is very bad, maybe you like to stay here! I mean society constantly … if they find out you are a Sharifi they ask you "why you don't leave". *Karim*

Nader's reaction was similar to his other responses, indifference:

> I thought about applying. Well, I was like this, that it didn't matter much to me that I would apply or continue my education or stay here and work. Although continuing my education here was not one of my [interests]. I mean I would go and continue my education there or work here, but one of the reasons was that I was not really in love with applying (laughs). Some people were, [they] really wanted to go, wherever it was ... yeah, I was not like this, to love to apply. But I wouldn't have mind going. I liked the experience and perhaps it would've been a better future if I had gone. *Nader*

The participants recalled conversations with their professors who advised them to leave Iran. They emphasized that when they said "everyone tells me to leave" the participants literally meant everyone. Cyrus' response was, he wanted to stay in Iran and reach a profession where he could help his people and "move our society forward". Karim expressed his frustration that he wanted to stay in Iran but also felt like he should leave. The majority of the stakeholders agreed with the participants' comments about leaving Iran, and Dr. Hossain (a professor in Sharif's industrial engineering department) added that 70 to 80 percent leave because they heard or saw others like them who went abroad and entered a university that offered many options of support and guidance that later led to a successful post-graduation life.

What was interesting about Cyrus' comment that "everybody went to Sharif to leave Iran" suggested a premeditated strategy of taking this path in order to leave; which could mean some of Cyrus' peers were not necessarily hopeless as a result of their experience, like he was. The one-dimensionality of studying, top grades, high GPAs, and top projects was argued by the participants as a deliberate plan by most *Sharifis* to gain admissions into a masters or doctorate program outside of Iran so they can leave the country. This could then suggest that the mental/emotional/psychological state of the other students was comparatively less distressed than the participants who became hopeless through experience and then became upset – and sometimes depressed – from that revelation. Moreover, this premeditated strategy further highlights the bottom-up neglect of not striving for change inside Iran.

Khanzadeh – *Unrealized Professional Aspirations inside Iran*

Another point to highlight was the advantage of being able to leave Iran if they wanted because of their degree from Sharif. The participants explained how many of the country's youth wanted to leave Iran but could not, primarily because they did not have the means to do so. Thus, while there was this positive aspect of graduating from Sharif, the participants (less Cyrus) saw their exodus as a failure. In other words, there was a push to leave Iran rather than a pull to go to another country because the extent of their agency inside Iran was bounded within the parameters described thus far which limited how and where they could manifest their agency and employability – which ultimately led to a ceiling on success and their standard of living.

6.1.1.3 Inaction

As the tension between the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* caused struggles for change and the participants feeling hopeless, it also created an atmosphere of leaving the country which in turn perpetuated the socially accepted norms because very little attention was given towards making improvements. Darius explained that "no one was interested in improving Sharif because they had one eye on leaving". This also included the *ghayre-khodi* professors:

> Professors are faced with similar challenges as these students. The pay is low, usually a professor makes 5-6 million Toman [roughly $450 USD] a month which is considered under the poverty line if you are married with two kids. And the negative atmosphere of society plays a toll on your own mind that you cannot focus as much on the students. And on top of all that if you studied in a foreign country but came back to Iran a part of you is regretful that you didn't stay there because you compare yourself with your classmates and see how much more successful they are, making more money, having a more relaxed life and you think to yourself that you wish you wouldn't have come back to Iran. *Dr. Hassan (stakeholder, Sharif Industrial Engineering professor)*

Dr. Hassan went on to say that as a consequence of many Sharif graduates and professors leaving, Iran's job market was scarcely populated with *Sharifis* who may have been inclined to hire a fellow *Sharifi*.

Ismail provided an example of how the inaction from Sharif resulted in poor quality education that could have otherwise potentially inspired him to pursue his major professionally considering he enjoyed chemical engineering:

> The facilities of the university are very low. The labs for example … you think that it's a [school] not a [university] department. Its building is just like a school. It's really bad … as I was looking at one of the labels on one of the lab equipment, it was made … in year 1966 … that means before the Revolution. 1966! How long ago is that? […] isn't this terrible? Because it's a part of the State, because it's the State, because it's the State […] they can make it [the lab equipment] in Iran, but they weren't making it. *Ismail*

Karim offered a different example of this inaction:

> **Karim:** [Sharif's professor evaluation] feedback system is weak … it's focus was not on the student … if it had this feedback system it would have realized that Sharif is not performing well and would have comprehended the needs of the student more … the interaction is very weak. […] I have become tired with university I mean I don't even like to study at Sharif, I am not willing…
>
> **Reza:** Because you are exhausted?
>
> **Karim:** No, I have not become exhausted but the quality … like I said I have seen many high level online courses that the barrier has vanished, like I can go watch a course from Stanford University, watch one from Harvard … they have risen my expectations and I don't care much for this system.

Darius explained how he forgot more than he learned during his four years in Sharif because the material he was taught at the Science Olympiad was on a "much higher level". One example Darius gave was how certain courses and their corresponding lab class were not taken within the same semester (he experienced a four semester gap between the course and its lab). He expressed how proper knowledge was lost with such a gap and "that is a weakness that bothered me very much". Darius' point was if we look at the students who scored the highest on the *konkur* – he claimed the top 800 (which was out of millions) – they were already intelligent to begin with. Ismail explained it further:

> If we remove Sharif University from Tehran and reopen it in one of the other cities … if we take the same university to another city … I mean with all its professors, staff, the whole package … and if we take out the students … altogether … I don't think Sharif would be among the top ten universities at all with this quality and service. As students

> always say … and I also think that they are right … Sharif is completely dependent on its students. I mean although the university puts its professors first, I believe that the whole university is really dependent on its students. I mean the people who enter the university are strong themselves. The university doesn't make them stronger. *Ismail*

Darius also explained how most professors used students to write their articles and used the name of Sharif to publish, in order to help their own careers – similar to how students used the name of Sharif to help them apply and leave Iran. Therefore, "no one was interested in improving" the problems in Sharif.

When I challenged the participants on what they were doing in spite of these shortcomings of outdated laboratories, ineffective evaluations, disengaged professors, and inadequate services, they unequivocally responded with "I can only rely on myself". The participants understood that they had to work that much harder to overcome these shortcomings. However, the extent of their agency could only take them so far when considering the parameters within which their agency can be manifested was limited by the *khodi* and the State's tentacles of influence. Moreover, the participants' tension with these actors also complicated the identification of their own aspirations, vis-à-vis the one-dimensional aspirations pushed upon them. Nevertheless, the participants focused on themselves but still sought advice and guidance because of their continued uncertainties on how and where to identify their own professional aspirations and prepare themselves for life after Sharif.

6.1.1.4 Misguidance

A fourth way the tension between the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* manifested for the participants was through (mis)guidance, or lack thereof. As explained above, professors were preoccupied with their own problems which limited them in fully advising, guiding, and/or mentoring their students. Moreover, the participants also experienced a faculty who "did not care about us" – as Nader and Karim put it. They explained how the majority of professors they encountered held similar views as Dr. Sajjad, who argued that "Sharif's mission is advancing the boarders

of knowledge" and that students need to "lower their expectations of life inside Iran and work harder to make a living". This argument highlights timely debates on whether higher education institutions should help its students for life after university or if students need to take more ownership and accountability. However, another significant issue is the participants' perception that such remarks and advice was (a) not indicative of their character, (b) empirically detached from the world the participants experienced outside of Sharif, and perhaps most importantly (c) void of any alternative practical recommendations as the participants transitioned into the job market. As a result, the participants' aspirations continued to exist as an extension of their pre-university aspirations. Thus, their struggles persisted in trying to identify their own professional aspirations.

The following quotes paints a picture of the lack of guidance the participants experienced.

> We didn't have something called a counselor, um, you could go talk to professors … talk to them like a counselor, but I didn't do this. *Nader*

> The relationships between professors and their students is not that good and students are kind of afraid of their professors. *Ismail*

> [Professors] actually don't consider you a human. Students don't dare to speak, it's not the way you think like we comfortably converse, no, not like this at all. A very top to bottom look. *Karim*

> No one thinks about this that a freshman who enters the university, what he needs to know. Which processes he should pass to change into a student ready to study […] somebody who is a stranger doesn't know anything and no one thinks of it that how can we lead him correctly at least in this weak educational system, we don't have such a thing at all […] A professor is assigned as a supervisor. He is your supervisor … well, it has become just a symbolic position for us that just exists. *Darius*

During their pre-university time, the participants were told to work hard for the best grades, the best schools, the best *konkur* rankings, and the best universities. Now within-university, they were told to work hard for the best grades, the best professors, the best projects, and the best letters of recommendations. As a result, the participants explained that not only did they

learn very little regarding knowledge and positive attributes to help them beyond Sharif, but they instead were taught negative qualities in order to progress on the one-dimensional pathway. This, they explained, was part and parcel of the inaction and misguidance from Sharif which opened the way for unhealthy or extreme competition, as they called it, as well as immoral and unethical behaviors inside Sharif.

Darius explained how his experience with the misguidance at Sharif was a microcosm of a larger issue that highlighted the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* tension:

> Competition means that everyone should have equal access to the procedures and everything and everyone should be aware of what is going on. But I believe that this [Sharif] is an [unhealthy] competition because one might have some information which is not shared with others and in fact doesn't want them to enter the competition. *Darius*

As a result, Darius shifted towards photography and basketball to distance himself from the Sharif environment. Similarly, Ismail disassociated with the circles he frequented at Sharif by the end of his second year and gravitated towards philosophy (he also exercised more, playing volleyball) in search of a deeper meaning and clearer understanding on what he was doing with his life. Nader never encountered the struggles that Ismail and Darius experienced. He did not experience these negative behaviors, nor was he greatly affected by its environment. However, similar to pre-university, Nader, again, aimlessly ascended through Sharif while feeling neglected and misguided. The one-dimensional path for Nader was affecting him even though he did not fully realize it until the end of his final year at Sharif. Karim, however, had similar experiences as Darius and Ismail. As a result, Karim refocused his learning towards online classes from Western universities such as Stanford and Harvard. Cyrus was more comparable to Nader in the sense of focusing on his classes, while also working throughout his time in undergrad.

Considering the extent of the participants' struggles at, and eventual withdrawal from, Sharif, I asked each of them if they had regretted going to Sharif. They all said no and highlighted two

advantages of being a *Sharifi*. First, they would see non-*Sharifis* struggling worse than them inside Iran. Second, their label of *Sharifi* provided them a path out of Iran since Sharif was internationally recognizable. Nevertheless, Ismail went on to express his frustrations with the broken promises he felt he was given that if one were to follow the one-dimensional aspiration one would have a successful life:

> You try so hard to achieve something…you try really hard…and the university doesn't provide anything for you. It's a fact…nor does society. In fact, they tan your hide and you don't get anywhere at the end. You try and you get nowhere. *Ismail*

The participants did admit in making mistakes with some of their choices, but later clarified that they were not so much choices but a path they were told to follow. Nevertheless, the participants believed that "there was no changing what had happened in the past so there was no point in dwelling on it". They also discovered that the whys and hows of these shortcomings, obstacles, and tension they had experienced were no longer important to them. The participants accepted that "this is how things are". As a result, they maneuvered through higher education alone. In doing so, meant having to unlearn the misguidance and look elsewhere for help.

6.1.1.5 A disconnect with the job market

Similar to how schools were disconnected from universities, most of Sharif was disconnected with the job market. One example the participants provided was the absence of a department or office such as a career services center. The participants could not believe – and at times, were frustrated – that Sharif University, which was globally ranked 646th (according to U.S. News & World Report, 2021), with an engineering program ranked 127th and was considered the MIT of Iran (if not the Middle East), and had graduates like Maryam Mirzakhani (winner of the 2014 Fields Medal) only in 2015 developed a careers services center – called the Sharif Career School – to help its students transition into the job market. Cyrus and Karim were at Sharif when the career school was operational, so they were able to capitalize on that service

in helping them develop into a multi-dimensional well rounded individual who felt they had acquired enough capital and strengthened their employability to succeed in Iran's job market.

Also, Cyrus' computer engineering department was viewed as helpful to its students. Cyrus spoke highly of most of his professors. As well as the job fairs, co-ops, and internships his department had that led to employment for the majority of its graduates. This was not the case for the other participants, however, which further disappointed them in the hopes of trying to figure out what they can do after leaving Sharif. The participants argued that the anomaly of the computer engineering department having a strong connection with the job market had less to do with the department's interest in building bridges to their industry and more to do with the demand of the nation and the world, vis-à-vis mobile apps, website development, IT services, and tech companies. Furthermore, the participants, as well as my Sharif stakeholders, explained how the *khodi* professors – or the *mafia*, as *Sharifis* called them – had established ties with their respected industries and prevented *ghayre-khodi* professors from either entering the industry or connecting with the companies the *khodi* already had relationships with – which were primarily State or *khusulati* companies. Due to this disconnect, Karim, for example, decided to help his fellow peers in their final year by building a consortium consisting of students and professors from his department (industrial engineering), and companies within the industry. He realized that if his department and/or university would not take an active role in building bridges with the job market then he would initiate one:

> I had this plan so the department can be linked to the industry and incidentally the industry side were much more eager. I was in charge of the graduation ceremony, and financial supervisor of our ceremony … so I'd go to different companies to see if they could be our sponsor. I spoke to good … the best companies in Iran and they were ecstatic to do so even though there wasn't any profit in it [for them] they just wanted to initiate contact so they will be able to collaborate with the university in the future which enables them to benefit by using the elite students in that major, smart youth. Maybe there wasn't any profit for them, but it became a point of contact between them and the university for the future. But a student made this connection not the university, while the university has to do it … not … a student. […] After I graduated no one continued with these relationships. *Karim*

Darius had a different experience with this disconnect:

> The [mechanical engineering] department never got linked to any industry to know what was taking place there, to be able to build that network. […] I don't know really why they don't do that … our department was very much involved in mafia stuff. I mean some professors who were in that mafia said something and it was done. Well, things like this is bothersome because now we're in the MBA [program] and they bring Digikala's [Amazon] manager and he introduces [his company], he introduces the positions they have, he sometimes is looking for interns. *Darius*

Darius' example of *DigiKala* highlights Karim's point regarding the best companies that were ecstatic to connect with Sharif but could not. The participants also referenced other newly formed companies that had greatly developed as a result of U.S. sanctions, and had the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship with Sharif but had yet to be linked with Sharif: *Snapp* (Iran's equivalent to Uber), *Tap30* (Lyft), *Namava* (Netflix), and *Divar* (Ebay). Karim went on to explain what he learned from his brief, and failed, attempt at trying to build this relationship:

> Sharif doesn't really have a relationship with good companies, especially the very good companies that can have good internships or bring projects, Sharif doesn't have relationships with them. They have official relationships with some companies and work with them […] the department doesn't even go after it … the university doesn't agree to collaborate with good companies. They have to be specific companies. By the force from university … the good companies aren't accepted. Like I said, once with one of the best companies in Iran, I went for sponsorship. The company itself became interested to build a relationship and work as a Sharif accelerator but it didn't happen. *Karim*

As a result, Karim described Sharif as an island. On the one hand, the university was isolated from schools and the job market. On the other hand, students were isolated from the faculty and department. Figure 3 below illustrates the participants' perception of the island metaphor between Sharif and the job market, how the participants felt they had to maneuver this obstacle on their own.

Figure 3

An Illustration of a Sharif Graduate Trying to Transition Into Iran's Job Market



Note. The image on the left saying now hiring is from Dave Granlund, by Dave Granlund, 2020 (https://www.facebook.com/210383290614/photos/pb.100044174422478.-2207520000../10163699325475615/?type=3) Copyright 2020 by Dave Granlund. The rest of the image is from People Matters, by Arunima Shrivastava, 2017(https://www.peoplematters.in/article/skilling/how-to-bridge-the-gap-between-academia-and-industry-15203). In the public domain.

Ismail pointed out that the full name of Sharif was دانشگاه صنعتی شریف which literally translates to the Industrial University of Sharif, and he argued:

> I think the industrial part is something extra. I haven't seen anything like this from professors. They don't have many relationships with their students or the industry. […] To be successful in the job market requires other factors. But we look at it in a linear way, if you get this GPA from a very good university, you should certainly be successful in your job, but you aren't. [You need] other skills … not merely the knowledge. It [working] requires skills which you don't have. *Ismail*

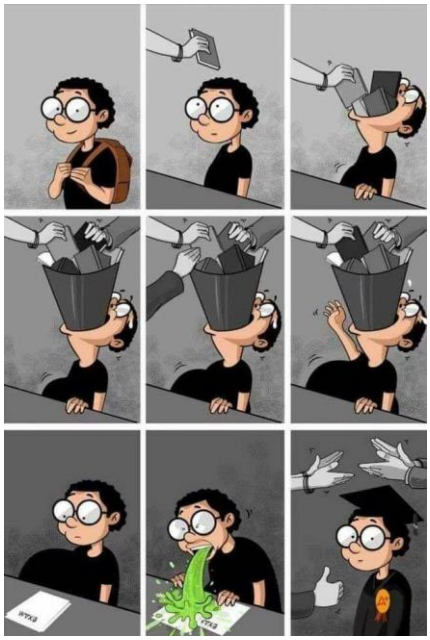
As the participants neared the end of their time at Sharif they were realizing the limits to how far their agency and employability could take them within the State and *khodi* parameters of Iran's education system and job market. The complex tension between the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* – which the participants found themselves a part of during their within-university experience – further confirmed for the participants that they were left alone to navigate their way into the job market while still uncertain about their future.

6.2 Tensions with the one-dimensional pathway

The participants' uncertainty was compounded by their struggles to distance themselves from the one-dimensional pathway while simultaneously trying to identify their own aspirations and determine how to realize those aspirations within the limited parameters inside Iran. As the disconnect with the job market continued, coupled with the aforementioned obstacles and shortcomings, the one-dimensional focus of "study, study, study", as Cyrus put it, continued to dominate the environment in which the participants were navigating. Figure 4 below illustrated this one-dimensional focus of studying and was a heavily circulated graphic throughout multiple Sharif social media channels that the participants mentioned as an accurate depiction of not just their four-year experience at Sharif but also as they transitioned out of Sharif. This continued tension according to Darius was "completely negative … the fact that we never see the things which are supposed to be intermingled with our life is very frightening".

Figure 4

A Graphic Used in Iran Depicting an Undergraduate Student's Educational Experience at Sharif



Note. From *Anjoman Elmi Daneshjui Daneshkadeh Mohandes Darya*, by Mohammad Mohammadi, 2018 (http://safmt.aut.ac.ir/?p=1319) In the public domain.

Darius went on to explain that "this is a structure which is imposed on you in a top-down manner … and you have to run in this straight line. This reality is very sad, and you can't get along with it." There was much to unpack with this comment, and as we spoke further, terms such as imposed, and top-down, painted a picture similar to the participants' experience during pre-university in having to "run in a straight line". The difference, this time however, was how it manifested and how the participants responded.

Nader, for example, who at the time of his within-university experience comparatively endured the least amount of hardship, realized later in life – and identified during our interviews in particular – that the people around him in Sharif and in society pushed the one-dimensional pathway that led to his uncertainties about his professional aspirations:

> Studying, you know like studying, they see growth in education, they put a lot of emphasis on education and getting good grades, writing good articles, I think they focus way too much on these things, rather preparing us for life in society which in my opinion is not very strong. Everybody is … selfish. [Almost] everybody is only thinking about themselves; they don't really think about others. *Nader*

Karim's description of this pathway further illustrated the one-dimensionality of the participants, the short-sightedness in their goal-setting, and the adverse effects on their life after higher education:

> The path has been chosen before in some ways. Study! Get into university, not just Sharif, get into university, get married, have kids, the end … as if you are done with one thing you are doing, it is finished, let's go to the next one. Many of the Sharifis! They are <u>many</u> … are one dimensional. They study <u>extensively</u> and they don't care about other skills […] The individual fails in many aspects of their lives, aspects of their soft skills haven't developed simultaneously. Like me, in social relations, and overall the youth because our time is mostly spent at the university, we don't [learn] these other aspects. If I want to describe it, we even tell each other that we have become an exam taking – or studying – machine. We have mastered these; we have reached the end of the line. How to have the best output how to study. So, we haven't grown in some other aspects. *Karim*

Considering Cyrus' department was an exception to what his fellow participants' experienced regarding connections with their industry, higher employment rates for their graduates, and

better internship programs that often led to employment, I asked if his department had a different/alternative approach to the one-dimensional aspiration that the other participants were experiencing:

> [I]t is just studying, nothing but studying. They didn't teach working, they didn't teach teamwork, they didn't teach living, they don't teach living – nowhere does … 99% nothing. Unless people have taken extra classes, like [Sharif] Career School. [Sharif] Career School really taught morality a bit, teamwork, living, but very few people go there. Most of my friends didn't go there and don't even know what it is. I mean 90% don't know about these things, and they don't teach anything to anyone. There is a bad expression, they say just sit down – like an ass – and study, study, study, take the exam, go higher – study, study, study – and they don't know anything about the fact that life is multi-dimensional. Many people at Sharif have the problem of being one-dimensional, they just study. I really tried to break this [one-dimensionality] because I said I am not an original Sharif student, so I did a bunch of things alongside it. *Cyrus*

Similarly, Darius no longer wanted to remain one-dimensional, or have Sharif tell him what his future should look like.

> [when I realized the barriers] I was mostly concerned with what needs to be done next now that all of these things happened. Although these limitations have been there, what should be done now? And in some ways you can't really change a lot of things … in that moment … if you have a wrong idea in your mind it is more difficult to change rather than learning something correctly from the beginning. First, you have to make sure and cut the wrong roots. […] for example, I went to environments wherein empathy existed … for example I went and did astronomy photography … I preferred to go that way, because it was clearer, because in Sharif they didn't cooperate well with each other … in [regards] to their agency. I always tried to work … have what I liked next to [my studies] which was useful for me … like computer and basketball … yeah, and many other things. But some people are instilled in such a way that if you don't check these boxes, your life will not start … well, because of that … many … their purpose, they didn't have any clear purpose they just studied. *Darius*

Ismail also had a similar approach, he gravitated towards philosophy and volleyball:

> I ask for others' opinions, but it is me who makes the final decision. I never let anyone interfere. I won't let it happen. No matter if he is an expert […] Yeah, so I don't know to what extent I experienced depression. I can say that yeah, I got depressed and sad … and in the second semester I wanted to drop out of the university. I experienced this, but after that, I said no … It isn't a big deal and I tried some other things alongside studying … there were some students who were studying so hard day and night in order to get better grades. Especially, students who are doing their bachelor's degree, but they don't have that holistic view, but I had this attitude at that time (laugh) … and I tried to understand even more things so that I could broaden my horizons. I went for different

> things. For example, one of them was … my English wasn't very good at that time, I also passed some German courses…something that…. there were five or six of us in the class. I wanted to try new things, but I always drilled this in my mind … the ethics … Spinoza focuses on ethics too (laugh) … I was trying to have this in my mind. So, I also got away from religion … I don't mean that I put it away completely, but I was more open-minded after that … I went for philosophy and started playing volleyball. *Ismail*

These experiences that Karim, Cyrus, Darius, and Ismail detailed highlights the moments in their lives when their individual agency and individual aspirations were taking shape while still in contention with the educational system's continued reinforcement of the one-dimensional aspirations. As a result, the participants actively pursued the aspects of their selves that were iteratively worn away by Sharif and society or pushed aside by themselves up to this point in their academic lives. This break from the one-dimensional pathway helped them forge their own path and begin to identify their own aspirations. Karim and Cyrus focused on personal growth and strengthening their employability through the Sharif Career School. Darius spent less time at Sharif and more time at the University of Tehran where he took up photography and athletics. He described how he wanted to change his environment in the hopes of discovering more about himself as well as his likes and dislikes. Ismail showed a quasi-arrogant attitude that he believed helped him overcome the barriers of the *khodi*. He described how he identified the one-dimensional problem and then adjusted his approach in order to have a more holistic view and broaden his horizons while overcoming feelings of depression.

The Sharif Career School that Karim and Cyrus attended, began in 2015 and initially served as a pilot career services office. By 2019 (during the fieldwork) it developed into a well-established career services center that provided much of the help *Sharifis* needed to transition into the job market. I interviewed Mr. Rida – one of my stakeholders, an employee at the career school – who detailed an average of 700 to 800 applicants every term with approximately 125 accepted as members and 30 of those as active participants in the school's programs. The school conducted workshops and seminars helping its members/participants learn and strengthen soft

skills, resume building, cover letter writing, mock-interviews, networking, and more. Cyrus (graduated in 2017) and Karim (2018) praised the Sharif Career School in helping them with their employability preparedness for the job market. Ismail (graduated in 2015), Darius (2016), and Nader (2017) did not participate in the career school because during their time it was either not fully operational (Ismail and Darius), or "it was not well known yet among the student body" (Nader).

Nader believed he could have benefited from the Sharif Career School but recalled not knowing it existed when he was a student. After four years at Sharif he did not know where his degree (mechanical engineering) could take him in Iran's job market. Nor did he know what he wanted to do post-graduation:

> One of the reasons they said choose electrical or mechanical engineering was that, applying [to foreign universities] for these two majors was relatively easier compared to others. Most of the people who chose mechanical and electrical engineering applied later [on]. Maybe that was one of the reasons [why I chose it]. For example, the first person who chose electrical engineering is in the U.S. now. The second person is in Italy now … the rest of us stayed for now. Perhaps we will go too […] some people use to tell me, they said people who go to Sharif either apply or will have so many job opportunities [in Iran] but still there is nothing. *Nader*

Nader admitted to many of his shortcomings and faults: his apathetic attitude towards strengthening his employability as well as his incomplete decision making based on misguided information. Unlike Cyrus and Karim, Nader was not active in searching for alternative paths like the career school. His continued aimless ascent from his pre-university into his within-university time hindered his academic and professional growth. This resulted in him being uncertain about his future and unable to identify his professional aspirations. However, even with a different approach between Nader and Karim, their transition into the job market was not so different.

On the one hand, Karim believed his time at the Sharif Career School helped him develop into a multi-dimensional well rounded individual who had acquired the capital and soft-skills, as he

put it, as well as strengthened his employability, to increase his likelihood in realizing his professional aspirations. On the other hand, Karim started at the same point as Nader, Ismail and Darius, when each of these gentlemen were in their final semester at Sharif. In other words, they still did not know what their own professional aspirations were, how they were going to achieve it, where they needed to start from, and who could potentially help them. Karim mentioned on multiple occasions how this thought process should have begun much earlier in his life rather than at age twenty-one, right before entering the real world. Cyrus, on the other hand, developed his entrepreneurial mindset after attending the Sharif Career School and had a business plan after Sharif.

In addition to these limitations and parameters that the participants tried to overcome as they transitioned into the job market, there were two added issues that further complicated their journey. The first was their mandatory military service, or *sarbazi* in Persian, and the second was their initial introduction to a more direct relationship with the State and *khodi* that they would be facing during their post-graduation time – at this juncture, specifically the economy.

6.2.1 *Sarbazi*

The first problem was the *sarbazi*. Every able-body-male of sound mind must complete two years of *sarbazi* after finishing their formal education. For the participants, this meant after their bachelor's degree – however, some individuals enlist after high school, while others after their master or doctorate. This issue will be expounded upon in the next chapter, but it is worth mentioning that this "box that needed to be checked", as Darius put it, was as much a burden as the stress of ranking high on their *konkur*. The attention the *sarbazi* demanded from the participants further stunted their ability in developing their own aspirations and distancing themselves from the one-dimensional pathway. The participants' explanations revolved around two points. First, the knowledge and skills they were to acquire in those two years were not related to their own professional aspirations and therefore did not prepare them for the job

market. Second, after completing the *sarbazi*, they would be two years behind the job market. Furthermore, their professional, geographic, and financial mobility was contingent upon the completion of their *sarbazi*.

For example, Ismail completed his *sarbazi* during my time with him in order to be granted his passport and his official bachelor's degree so he could apply to foreign universities and leave the country. He described how his peers initially ridiculed him for enlisting, but later commended him because he "was now free to do whatever" he wanted. The job offers Cyrus and Karim received through the career school were reneged shortly after when the employer discovered they did not complete their *sarbazi*. Thus, they spent the majority of their final months at Sharif, as well as the subsequent months after graduation, trying to navigate, and possibly resolve, the *sarbazi* obstacle.

Nader, on the other hand, tried a different approach. He purposely failed his internship requirement to postpone graduation in order to find a resolution to his *sarbazi*. I asked him if he only used the internship for that purpose or if he also used it to help find employment. After contemplating for a couple of minutes Nader admitted he never thought about the latter part of my question. He went on to explain that internships from his department (mechanical engineering) did not lead to employment, so he was not hopeful in reaching his aspirations through this program. However, Nader did see it as an opportunity in postponing his *sarbazi* while he looked for a job in Tehran. Cyrus and Karim gave similar explanations on avoiding their *sarbazi* by applying for a master's program while also trying to find a job. Darius, on the other hand, was exempt because of a medical reason[8]. Nevertheless, portions of the participants' time and attention that could have been placed on their professional maturation

[8] There are other ways to be exempt from the sarbazi but none of them applied to the participants. For example, if the father requires his eldest son to help him financially support his family. If the father is a veteran of the Eight Year War with Iraq, the son can serve a shorter conscription.

and transition into the job market was allocated towards their attempts to avoid or resolve their *sarbazi*.

6.2.2 Economy

The second problem was the volatility of the nation's economy. Cyrus described how the feeling of the impossibility in planning for the future and the uncertainties of life in Iran overshadowed his professional aspirations:

> After I passed the konkur everything got worse. The stress got <u>really</u> worse, the pressure got worse, competition got worse … in Sharif all these things became more acute, and things get more worse than in school. And … none of the problems were resolved and everything got worse. My aspiration … at that time … was to set up a computer company based on my ideas. These things were on my mind at that time … Look, the only awful thing about this country is that … the right thing to do is one should have a plan for the next 5, 10, 15 or 20 years. I always had these plans. I knew where I wanted to be at 30 years old; what I'll be doing at 35, where I'll be at 40. However, you sleep and wake up and you see the country has an unstable situation and everything is messed up and everything is destroyed, and you should begin from scratch. This volatility destroys you and in some places you can do nothing, and you are easily irritated and want to fight with everyone, and you don't have the patience for anyone. *Cyrus*

As a result of the economic volatility and uncertainty that the participants' felt, Nader, for example, did not pursue computer engineering for his masters:

> I thought that if I go start learning it until I become an expert, then perhaps the job market would no longer be good, they would no longer have a good salary … or maybe I made a mistake. If I had gone and I studied computer … yeah … well, I made a mistake. If I had gone, by now, it would still have a good job market […] If I go back, I would probably choose computer. *Nader*

My conversation with Nader on the economy was fascinating because we discussed how after twenty years, computer engineering (or science) related fields – for example, digital currency, smart devices, artificial intelligence, and software applications – had continued to be one of the dominant industries in the job market. Thus, for Nader to initially believe during his within-university time that this path would not be fruitful, only to later realize that he made a mistake

further highlighted the problem that the concern about the country's economic volatility influenced Nader and Darius' decision making for their future.

> There was something created in my mind that I thought there is nothing going on in the other majors. I didn't see much better conditions in the university. I saw students in electrical [engineering], industrial [engineering], and aerospace [engineering]. I saw all of them and it seemed that they were no better than mechanical [engineering]. And for computer [engineering], now I say it is better but just the working condition is better … and that is just for now … no one knows what will take place tomorrow. *Darius*

Darius grew up with, and greatly enjoyed, computers, but did not seriously consider pursuing it out of fear of not knowing "what will take place tomorrow". Even when I raised the same argument about how computer related careers had a strong job market for at least twenty years, Darius did not believe that applied to Iran because of the daily economic volatility, political and business corruption.

Karim had a similar experience but because he explored online courses from Stanford and Harvard, attended the Sharif Career School, and participated in psychological tests, his thought processes was comparatively more developed. He thought about concepts like soft skills, and agency versus structure. As a result, he analyzed himself as well as his path, and even when he finally (thought he) discovered his path, he still had a level of uncertainty:

> From primary school to middle school to high school to Sharif, there was a certainty in life … that you have to go on this path … get good grades, pass the konkur, go to a good university, graduate, get a job. So you were not stressed much, because you knew your path was set. But it became more [uncertain] for me … actually when I went to Sharif, it became much more [uncertain] for me … and it increased my stress a little. The mental perplexities suddenly became serious that I have to choose myself … I can say [the uncertainty] was good in one aspect, but I wish it had happened sooner, I liked it to happen sooner. I felt this maturity has to come into existence little by little, now it is late, it is a bit late, […] now even though I know my path, many new paths come to my mind, and it makes decision making harder for me. Sometimes I think is the path I am walking on the right one? *Karim*

6.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the participants' lived experiences with the continued push by Sharif and society to follow the one-dimensional pathway. As well as the participants' tension with the State and *khodi* that reinforced the one-dimensional pathway; which was also accompanied with continued reassurances that if the participants followed this one-dimensional path they would reach a non-specified, guaranteed, and successful life – i.e., a human capital argument contrived through a *khodi* framework. This tension reached an apex for the participants as they were maturing and starting to fully grasp the one-dimensionality in their upbringing and the shaping of their aspirations by Iran's educational institutions, society, and the people in their lives – i.e., professors, counselors, tutors, classmates, relatives, and strangers. Section one discussed this and detailed the participants' realization of and response to the tension between the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* dynamic throughout Sharif. As a result, the participants actively pursued their own aspirations. However, this pursuit created another tension as the participants realized their uncertainty in what their own professional aspirations were. Section two discussed this, as well as the added barriers the participants experienced as they were set to transition into the job market; which further highlighted the limitations within the parameters the participants had to navigate in order to either reach the guaranteed and successful life they were promised up to that point, or try to realize their own professional aspirations inside Iran.

The following vignettes from Darius and Ismail's experiences and perceptions summarizes the participants' within-university experiences.

> I knew my self-confidence was weak. I knew my aloofness was overpowering. So I worked on them. My friends became depressed, my sister passed away, my grades were dropping. I got a sports injury! I had to move!! I'm falLING BEHIND! I AM RUNNING IN PLACE! BUT!! {ahem} … but … I adapted, I adjusted, I evolved. I did what I had to do to make it…but what about you?
>
> I have to think about that…let's come back to this. I found my interests. I found some hobbies. I found a new spot that gave me good vibes. I changed it up! I got good grades…well, good enough. I finished my project…well, barely. I checked the boxes

> you wanted. I jumped through the hoops you wanted. I listened. I obeyed. I "learned"… I learned … I waited. I searched. I assessed. I unlearned … {sigh} … but what about you?
>
> You helped me with lodging so I could try to escape my uncertainties. You gave me an easy path to leave my country, even though I didn't want to. You forced me to find my own way… *Darius*

> Look. I get it. I'm a realist. Funding is low, wages are low, sanctions are suffocating, competition is insane, brain drain is high, corruption, nepotism, cheating, stealing, lying, blah, blah, blah.
>
> Look. I get it. I was a bit unrealistic…when I was younger, inexperienced. They make sure you do things a certain way. They watch over you. They can get things you can't, they have more access, different rules, better connections, blah, blah, blah.
>
> Look. I get it. I'm not naive. You don't care … or, you don't have the time to. You have your own problems. You have your own regrets. But when you're the ones we're looking towards … no … when you're the only ones out here that know better than us, that know more than us, that have gone through this journey, that are "molding" and "shaping" and blah, blah-blah, blah-blah…
>
> Wait. I get it. If <u>you</u> have been going through this, for this long, then what the hell am I going to do? *Ismail*

As the participants increasingly became self-critical in acknowledging their own shortcomings, while also internalizing their focus to strengthen their employability, become multi-dimensional, with the aim to find their own aspirations and forge their own pathway, they still felt the inequities of the one-dimensional pathway. They were still uncertain of what their own professional aspirations were, how to identify it, and how to realize it inside Iran. Moving forward into the participants' post-graduation time we will see how the one-dimensional aspirations became deflated for the participants, thus leading to a sense of broken promises on human capital vis-à-vis the State expectations that had been pushed on them, and the continued struggles and obstacles despite the participants' efforts in enacting their agency and employability to navigate the job market.

Chapter 7. Post-graduation: Deflated aspirations

In this chapter I further expand on the ways participants' enhanced their employability in order to avoid the one-dimensional aspirations they felt were pushed on them since pre-university. I also detail the moments of aspiration deflation, when the participants realized that the guarantees they were reassured, if they followed the one-dimensional path, were not accurate reflections of the post-graduation life they were experiencing. The participants illustrated the highly-centralized context they experienced which they believed counteracted their efforts in trying to realize their own professional aspirations inside Iran. The data reveals a temporal significance in the way the participants described a weak economy, precarious job market, and social context that induced, and often forced, the one-dimensional mentality that they felt pushed them towards the same pathway that they were taught throughout the education system. The (f)actors in this third stage of the participants' lives was the manifestation of the country's societal discourse through the State's tentacles of influence: the *khodi* and *khusulati* in particular.

There were, however, two significant changes at this third stage that distinguishes it from the previous two stages. First, the concept of *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* became increasingly tactile for the participants as they reported direct involvement by the *khodi* – i.e., governmental entities and other tentacles of the State – in counteracting their attempted pursuits in realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran. Their report highlights an issue that has mostly been colloquial and hearsay. What the participants explained illustrates the *khodi* as being afforded certain privileges, concessions, and preferences – depending on the extent of their connection to the State – that *ghayre-khodi* individuals did not receive. This leads to the second significant change: unlike their pre- and within-university experiences, where the participants believed they could eventually realize their own aspirations inside Iran, at this stage they believed they were confronted with a ceiling that denied their attempts towards that realization and therefore

ended that belief or hope in Iran. This resulted in the participants either lowering their aspirations, accepting their current state of affairs, and reverting to the one-dimensional path, or leaving the country. Cyrus offered his account of these two significant changes when discussing his former boss:

> He owes a lot of people a lot of money. Collectors track the poor man down every day with legal threats. And some promise to kick his ass! A good man, who could easily earn money a thousand different ways … he had very lucrative offers from foreign companies to help their child education programs but he said, "I want to stay in my country!" … "I want to serve my people". What was the outcome? He's miserable! He sacrificed his own life and his family … they don't want people like him to improve society. They don't allow you to grow in this society. They beat the hell out of you … if you want to raise your head just a little, they hit you back down. Either shut up and live in this society … or else. *Cyrus*

7.1 Tension with the job market

The participants' aspired to contribute towards the betterment of society through their profession. However, they reported encountering resistance in their efforts in trying to realize this inside Iran. Darius, for example, planned to go to a developed country but return to Iran and try to implement what he learned within the context of Iranian society/culture. Although, he admitted it would be difficult:

> If I can go there [abroad], acquire the knowledge and come back here to implement it…it can be more effective in comparison to staying here. But they don't let you … not that they don't let you…but they stand in your way. However, before the revolution, there were a series of programs … I mean, most of the people who are in charge now have gone to MIT and Harvard with those funds and grants and they are ruling over the people now. *Darius*

As the participants navigated Iran's job market it became evident to them that certain industries or areas within the job market were denied or restricted to them despite, what they believed to be, their best efforts. Similar to Darius' explanation of how the *khodi* had stood in his way, the other participants also explained how, historically, this resistance could be seen since the establishment of the Islamic Republic where many of the individuals who went missing, fled

the country, or were imprisoned or murdered were individuals whose profession aimed at making changes within society – through academia, civil society, social work, human rights, and political engagement (Bayat, 2009) – that the *khodi* saw as an existential threat to the socially accepted norms they had established and wielded into power and control. Karim gave an example of a Sharif professor who was forced into retirement because he "criticized the university's condition" and had ideas on improvements. Darius also gave an example of a ministry advisor who fled the country because of the severe opposition he faced when wanting to implement changes (Tamman, 2021).

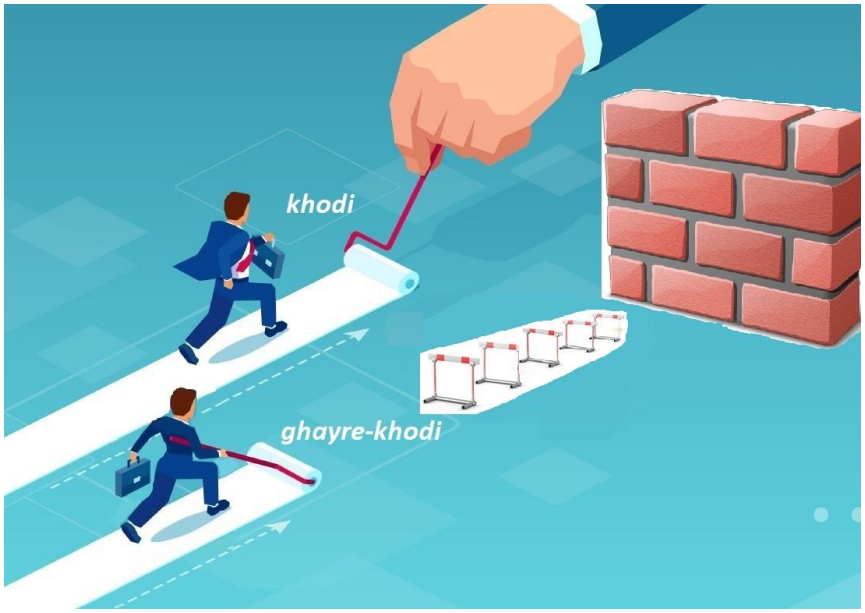
The participants went on to explain that when they were in Iran's job market the parameters within which they had to navigate appeared to be more limiting than what they (a) were promised growing up, and (b) experienced during their pre- and within-university time. As Ismail put it, "if one were to work for or own a company that sells/provides goods/services they would be left alone and could potentially live a comfortable life". Thus, it was business ventures – like a retail store or restaurant – or employment opportunities – working for a company – that the participants felt were regularly insisted upon by society and reinforced by the *khodi*. Moreover, there were large portions of Iran's job market that were either impossible to enter or extremely difficult to succeed in, and often required compromises that the participants found ethically, professionally, and/or legally questionable. As a result, the participants described a sense of denial in their pursuits to realize their own professional aspirations inside Iran if it did not comply with the one-dimensional aspiration. Further tension with the job market developed when on the one hand, the one-dimensional aspirations deflated from the ambiguous promises of a guaranteed successful life to specific types of professions within specific types of industries. Thus, the participants' ability to realize their own professional aspirations inside Iran increasingly appeared elusive. Moreover, two issues added to this elusiveness and further complicated the participants' navigation of the job market.

7.1.1 Monopolizing the job market

Monopolization of the job market by the *khodi* was one of those issues that the participants perceived as a limitation and barrier to realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran. For the participants, if it was not the push to pursue the one-dimensional aspiration, it was the restrictions on either entering or trying to excel in certain industries within the job market. As Darius stated above, "they stand in your way", or as Cyrus described, "if you want to raise your head just a little, they hit you back down". Figure 5 below illustrates the participants' perception of how a *ghayre-khodi* job seeker experiences Iran's job market compared to a *khodi* job seeker. Interestingly, Karim believed this figure demonstrated the limitations and barriers in regards to government or State related professions. However, Nader and Ismail believed this figure demonstrated the overall job market as well as the cultural and religious obstacles of Iran – in other words, if you are not a Shia-Muslim and a Persian-Iranian you may have additional barriers to overcome inside Iran. Darius explained that although the term *khodi* was used to exclusively signify a specific group of ideologues within the Iranian military, government, and State, areas like education and the job market (as well as real estate, trade, finance, tech, banking, and commerce) have increasingly been populated by this group as well.

Figure 5

An Illustration of the Khodi Versus Ghayre-Khodi Tension Within Areas of Iran's Job Market



Note. From The Hub Daily, by Fasih Zia-i, 2021 (https://hubdaily.net/taboo/social-issues/gender-equality-a-popular-slogan/). In the public domain.

Moreover, the participants believed this monopolization was also an attempt to curb the existential threats the *khodi* saw with individuals and/or entities aiming to engender any kind of change that had the potential to weaken or challenge the *khodi*'s control and revenue. One example the participants gave was the one-dimensional push towards STEMM disciplines throughout pre- and within-university that continued during post-graduation in order to limit the exploration of non-STEMM fields – such as civil society, art, music, or politics – because these professions were seen as a higher likelihood in disrupting the socially accepted norms established by the *khodi*. The participants cited popular artists and musicians within Iran whose works are accepted by the *khodi* and allowed to publicly perform. On the other hand, the underground art and music scene of those who defied the *khodi*'s status quo either ended up being censored, imprisoned, gone missing, or fled the country. Similarly, the participants felt their own professional maturation was stymied in order to remain within the ceiling of acceptable social norms. Particularly, throughout school and partly during Sharif by the institutions they grew up in and navigated, as well as post-graduation where those parameters

and limitations variegated to also include the barriers in which they were able to manifest their employability and navigate the job market.

Ismail and Karim also added the economic element to this monopolization as the *khodi*'s way of controlling the means of wealth for three reasons. First, considering that sanctions had crippled the economy for forty-two years, the limited streams of revenue needed to be monopolized in order to fund and sustain the *khodi*'s control, power, and influence over the country. Second, having such control ensured that competition remained weak or non-existent. Third, this also ensured that no private company could solely amass enough wealth and influence to possibly challenge the *khodi*.

On a macro level, Ismail described how private companies struggled to win projects and work:

> I think the companies in Iran do not get big projects unless they are linked to the State. I mean Iran is not a free place where a company can win a project … like a million or billion dollar [project]. No, it's nothing like this. I don't think so. I think it's in the hands of the State and the State, well … the places that are dependent on the State in Iran do not necessarily aim for efficiency. They simply want to get the work done … a routine job. *Ismail*

He went on to explain how this adversely effected the companies' hiring potential, quality of work, as well as their employees' growth within the company. The participants explained how routine jobs – either at the private, *khusulati,* or government companies – were the main types of jobs they could find. They viewed these jobs as routine or dead-end for different reasons. With private companies there was a lack of funds and projects, so the work required was repetitive and minimal. With *khusulati* companies, there was a dichotomous tension where on the one hand funding, projects, and job growth were more common because the *khodi* was involved but there was a ceiling, on the other hand, on the participants' professional ascension due to the participants being considered *ghayre-khodi*. With government companies the *khodi* was solely in charge and Karim provided a prime example of Iran's auto industry and their job market problems:

> Iran Khodro, the auto industry. We have so many good mechanical engineers, why can't we design? They don't want it, because here is the State … it's a State company. This is a monopoly. Auto production has become monopolized, they have the power, whatever they say, they can raise the price, lower the price, they can do whatever they want. And if someone else produces something with higher quality and they [Iran Khodro] can't find a buyer, they'll be forced to deploy R&D, improve themselves. But this doesn't exist. Now it's been so many years and their [Saipa] Pride car, I think it's being produced for 30 years now and it's still the same, what kind of company is this? […] In Iran because our country does not grow, does not develop … many fields cannot develop … it's an economic and ideological debate. *Karim*

When Nader interned at *Iran Khodro* he described how the engineers and employees barely worked, and if they did it was minimal and repetitive work. They explained to him how little they produced, that every day was the same, and there was limited professional growth.

On a micro level, Ismail elaborated from his previous comment of working for or owning a company that sells/provides goods/services:

> I think it has become a fact in Iran … if you get involved in producing … the production of sneakers, bags, to computer software, electrical things, mechanics, for example designing and stuff like that … most probably, you will go bankrupt … it can be anything, it doesn't matter. But if you get involved in providing services, you can make money … like if you run a restaurant, or store to sell clothes, it would be ok, and people would buy them. But with inflation … the value of one dollar increased from 3,000 Toman to 12,000 Toman. Who would think this might happen? Imagine that you were in the production industry. You would be officially bankrupt. *Ismail*

Ismail went on to describe his experience with these economic problems and the monopolization of an industry he and his two friends tried to enter with their startup.

> The [company] that I told you my friends and I started … if you don't have a connection in the State, it won't succeed. Because this [industry] is only with the State. There are no private companies in this [industry]. We learned that everything is in the hands of the State. Because it's not open, in my opinion, they don't give just anyone permission to work [in this industry]. You can't enter the market and make the changes that you like; it's not like that. *Ismail*

Ismail added later on that they continued with the work and his two friends persisted further after he left the startup, but they were unable to obtain funding because the major sponsors were also a part of the *khodi*. When I asked him why he left he replied:

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> I think making efforts like this is fruitless in Iran. It's better to leave the country. The resistance was there. I mean you could still see the influence of the State. I mean, you might have a great idea ... your idea is really good, and it will work. You conduct the feasibility phase of the project, you know that your idea will work, but no, no … not with the State. *Ismail*

A couple years after Ismail's startup failed, a *khusulati* company formed offering the exact same service (and it became a multi-million dollar company). Ismail's criticisms were also echoed by the other participants, as well as my stakeholders. Dr. Hassan (Sharif Industrial Engineering professor), in particular, added that the disconnect between universities and the job market was partly due to the monopolization by the *khodi*:

> Ninety percent of major companies are in the hands of the State so there is no competition and therefore production is low, R&D is low, the overall quality of these companies' output is low. Therefore, in Iran the mismatch between university and industry is enormous and these big companies do not need graduates from Sharif but rather a simple engineer who fixes machines. The industry blames universities for not preparing their students for Iran's real world and universities blame the industry for not lifting itself to the standards of the rest of the world. *Dr. Hassan*

Thus, on the one hand the participants experienced and described the disconnect between Sharif and the job market because of a disinterest from the university side. On the other hand, however, the same disinterest existed from the industry side. This reciprocal disinterest left the participants feeling alone in their navigation of the job market, which continually led them to the routine, dead-end, unmeaningful, and unthreatening jobs they had been trying to avoid. In other words, even though the participants tried to identify their own professional aspirations, they still pursued such employment because their experiences and perceptions proved to them that these were the dominant positions available in the job market. Moreover, society and the people in their lives were still pushing them towards these positions, but now their rationale was different from before. During pre- and within-university, the participants were told to trust in God and the pathway they were on would lead them to a guaranteed successful future. Now that they are at that future, they are told to "just get a job, start working, start a family, and

that's it". Thus, the participants continued to feel alone, and the one-dimensional aspiration they were raised on was still a factor in their decision making processes.

Alternatively, there was the possibility of working for the government or State. However, none of the participants were interested in doing so, for the reasons provided above. Nader, for example, had a job interview with a government company and described how their focus was more on ideology than the work. Karim had a similar experience and what he added was fascinating and troubling:

> **Karim:** [Working for the government] can't be done you know why? Now it's ideological. Like maybe we have someone competent like the person studies economics and is competent but doesn't agree with the system ideologically so he can't go to work for the government in economics because he's not ideologically aligned. It's not necessarily a meritocracy or expertise … other factors are there, and that's their priority, the ideology, I'm saying things that… (chuckles)
>
> **Reza:** Do you want me to stop recording?
>
> **Karim**: hmm I don't know
>
> **Reza:** It's ok, if you want you don't have to say it
>
> **Karim**: Yeah can you stop recording, the things I'm saying will cost me.

Karim's nervousness about criticizing the State or government was not a surprise because the other participants had the same concern. After I stopped recording, Karim went on to describe how the State's or government's job interview process was more about their ideological and religious beliefs rather than their qualifications or expertise – similar to what Nader experienced – which was followed by a grooming process to ensure their employees think the way the States does. Cyrus' anger overpowered his fear, and he did not want me to stop recording, "it will be good if they find out about these things, because they should know how private companies put their whole life in their job and have many employees and they became miserable because of them, it is their fault".

For Cyrus, the aforementioned issues of why and how the *khodi* monopolized the job market was a problem that went beyond the debates of meritocracy versus nepotism, competition versus monopolization, or ideology versus economy. Cyrus' lived experiences will show how his professional efforts in attempting to help Iranian society was repeatedly met with resistance, obstacles, and struggles due to what he believed to be the *khodi*'s existential fear of a private company amassing enough wealth and/or influence to possibly challenge a portion of the *khodi*'s control.

> The [first] company I worked for wasn't good … I mean the company was good but because of … country issues, [our] ideas were not commercialized. I worked in a private company not in a State-owned company, the difference with a State-owned company is that they pay you just a hand-to-mouth salary, but it is guaranteed, and you know you have a fixed income every month. In a private company, there are no protections, legal or monetary. Many … governmental organizations … bothered us, in varies ways… *Cyrus*

This company was the first of four that he either worked for (one) or started (three) that eventually failed because of these encounters with the *khodi*. Cyrus explained with much frustration that because of the *khodi*'s monopolization throughout the job market, his professional aspirations were denied and over a span of five years (2014 to 2019) he fluctuated between employment and unemployment, and entrepreneurship and bankruptcy – I will go into greater detail about Cyrus' experiences in the next section.

Nader also encountered the *khodi*'s monopolization of his industry (mechanical engineering) but not through the denial of building a company, rather, the limitations on job opportunities:

> When I wanted to work in the field of mechanical engineering I saw that there are very little positions available. One company was under the auspices of the Revolutionary Guard Corps … this bothered me a little because I have heard that if you work for the Revolutionary Guard Corps you would not be able to apply later and go to the U.S. because they're really sensitive about this … one reason was this and also the day I went for the interview they said here everybody prays and fasts, and, I didn't tell you something, I'm not a Muslim and the fact that they said here everybody prays and everybody fasts, well, this bothered me, this would bother me later. *Nader*

I debated with the participants on why they would not start with these unmeaningful, unthreatening, routine dead-end jobs, gain experience, network, move on to something better, and step-by-step make it to the profession they desire. While Cyrus laughed and said, "live here for twenty-five years and you'll see why it won't work", three of the participants offered a more compelling argument:

> I will accept to start at a lower position with a lower salary but what about my future? There's no job growth or salary increase. You can't make much progress … you can make progress only to a certain extent, but if, for example, you want to be a manager, you will need some other factors that are not ethical. You can't buy a house and start a family with this salary. *Ismail*

> I [am ok] going somewhere and they say you don't know what to do or it's a field of work that you have not worked in before … and this place would let me work as an intern for one or three months and pay me a low salary, but when I [prove I can] work for you, well then I should get a pay increase. Two positions … were at factories and the people who worked there as mechanical engineers did not do much, they spent most of the time hanging out together from morning to afternoon, they screwed in a couple of the screws and just passed the time together. It was a government company [...] that I went to the internship program there and mechanical engineering was not what they did there. Their job was mostly what a simple worker does, the expertise level required was just to be able to screw in a couple of screws […] The other was even a private company, and it had the same situation, I mean, the place was like half closed, some employees were kept but they didn't do anything really. *Nader*

> With regard to the major that we were studying … mechanical engineering … in general, we are not in a good position in Iran's industry and basically, whatever exists, is outdated and there aren't any modern and pioneer places to work so that we could get our hopes high about working. Of course, there are some changes being made little by little, but in comparison to other countries, we still lag way behind. *Darius*

7.1.2 Unhealthy environment

The second added issue the participants described as further complicating their pursuits in trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran was the ethical dilemmas they encountered when seeking alternative employment to the routine or dead-end jobs that were readily available. As they navigated these alternative options of employment, the participants initially grappled with, and later struggled to reconcile with certain aspects of its stipulations

that appeared to them to be prerequisites towards a comparatively more feasible path to (a) earning enough money to buy a house, get married, and have kids, and/or (b) ascend in their career to possibly realize their professional aspirations. Those prerequisites, according to the participants, entailed morally – and at times, legally – questionable decisions.

Ismail briefly mentioned above, "you can make progress only to a certain extent […] you will need some other factors that are not ethical". He gave examples of nepotism, deception, and unhealthy competition. I challenged Ismail's opposition to these "not ethical factors", as he put it, and argued that a lesser version of them – i.e., networking, embellishment, and competition – were common practices within the job market. He agreed and stressed that he applied these methods, but went on to explain that:

> Overall, maybe we can say don't be black or white. Be gray. But if you want to stay in Iran and make progress, you should move towards being black (laughs). In my view, this is my personal opinion, of course, but […] when you enter a thought system, you have to accept it … you have to accept certain things. Now, if you don't observe some things in that thought system, it's ok but you won't [progress] in that framework. But now, I have some problems with that framework itself, you know… It's not really aimed at goodness and it's not right I think. It's not like it will be reformed and become better later on. *Ismail*

The thought system Ismail referred to was the not ethical mentality that he believed individuals already had or needed to adopt, post-graduation, in order to achieve their professional goals within the framework of the job market and society that has been greatly influenced by the *khodi*. He went on to argue that an unhealthy environment developed in Iran's job market as a result of the *khodi*'s monopolization and the vacuum that was created where unethical or illegal practices became the norm:

> When you make an effort and when you work hard at something, you might achieve something and your achievement shouldn't be dependent on other people, and their approval … the people who have not been involved in your efforts. But now we have this as a fact that some people do not make any efforts, but they succeed anyway. Such an environment is not a healthy one … Simply working in this environment would limit you to be a simple employee, I think. *Ismail*

One of my stakeholders – Dr. Ali (Sharif MBA professor) – who had a close proximity to Iran's job market because of his expertise, added a fascinating point to Ismail's argument:

> Most of the industries belong to the State. There aren't many powerful, wealthy, and big companies that are private. […] Most of their success is not linked to their productivity or good management. What is it related to? To how much kickback they can get, to how close they are to political forces. Well, when this is the case, naturally many companies do not need an expert work force. *Dr. Ali*

The participants also believed that many individuals that were able to (a) earn enough money to buy a house, get married, and have kids, and/or (b) ascend in their career accepted the thought system and prevailed within the framework that the participants viewed as morally questionable. The example they provided was in reference to *dalal* work. The word *dalal* literally translates to broker. This Iranian word for broker means much more than the standard definition, however. The participants explained that this profession was stigmatized in Iran with labels of thievery, chicanery, and immorality (a comparable example within a Western context would be the stereotype or stigma of a used car dealer). Thus, while the participants complained of the parameters within which they had to navigate, none of them saw a profession as a *dalal* as an option – even though there was a lot of money in it. The participants' professional aspirations primarily revolved around a career that provided a service that would improve society and raise the standard of living. They were not willing to comprise their beliefs or values for quick money as they called it.

> Overall, in this country there are two ways to make a lot of money: either you work with rant [under the table bribes], nepotism, being a part of the [khodi]. Or, become a broker – which makes a lot of money – whatever brokers work in they make a lot of money from cars to houses, anything ... buy and sell stuff … they buy it cheap, make it look nice – doesn't mean it is – and sell it for a huge profit. But in my view this work is cheap, an absurd job that you don't serve your society and you're damaging the country's economy. In some way the money isn't good money … it's not halal … you're not serving your society and you're just causing inflation. And … those who are getting rich right now is through these two. *Cyrus*

> When it comes to morality, society tells me to "get lost" [laughter] … it doesn't matter at all. Society doesn't care about morality…no, no… society … society cares about

> how much money you make and how you can get your work done through whatever means … violence even. *Ismail*

> This method of making progress or becoming more successful through doing immoral things … like dalal [work] … it's kind of accepted and used and it is not even considered shameful, and no one is even feeling guilty anymore as a result of such behaviors because it has become so natural. [Also] the general idea is that relations are more superior to regulations … This is the reality of today's society. You would prefer to bring someone whom you trust because the rules and regulations are not that valid and trustworthy, as our legal system has problems. You can't follow-up on so-and-so who has done something wrong. This is not very easy. *Darius*

While the participants reported hearing, witnessing, and often experiencing these not ethical factors throughout the job market and society, none of them were willing to move towards being black let alone be gray, as Ismail put it. As a result, they felt this was another reason why the job market was working against them, pushing them down the one-dimensional pathway of a routine job, and living a quiet life.

Thus, the tension that developed for the participants between navigating these parameters, trying to depart from the one-dimensional aspiration, and trying to realize their own aspirations shaped their professional aspirations in a way that they believed left them with four options: (1) become an employee of a company that was either wholly or partly owned by the *khodi*, (2) become an employee for a private company, (3) start their own company, or (4) leave Iran. Regarding options two and three, if the participants and their employer/company remained within the parameters – and under the ceiling – of the *khodi*'s one-dimensional pathway, they would make enough money to live a quiet life and be left alone. However, depending on what the company did, how lucrative it became, and/or how popular/influential it became, there was an increased likelihood in being pressured to become (a) partly or wholly owned by the *khodi* or (b) risk failing and going bankrupt if they refused to cooperate with the *khodi*. This, the participants described, was a part of the ceiling they perceived as keeping them boxed within certain parameters, so they do not challenge or threaten the *khodi* and its power, wealth, and

influence throughout the country. The following section will expound on these four options in more detail, but in short, the participants did not see a fifth option where they could realize their professional aspirations inside Iran and thus four of the participants – excluding Cyrus – worked on their exit strategy. I challenged these four participants again on why it was an inconceivable thought for them to find a job in Iran, start a family for example, and work towards their aspirations in other ways. Their response was, leaving Iran had a higher rate for success when the environment is healthy; irrespective of the country, where the laws were implemented and the parameters within which their agency could be manifested was comparatively less limited by the State, government, education system, and society they grew up in and had to navigate in Iran.

Interestingly, the participants' ability to identify and oppose these monopolizations and unhealthy environments, at the post-graduation level, could be viewed as a product of their upbringing within a similar framework during pre- and within-university. The institutions and people the participants experienced throughout their lives had enabled them to think critically about this thought system and try to position themselves outside it. As we further discussed this dichotomous realization that the framework they rejected was, to a certain extent, the same framework they grew up in, the participants detailed three points. First, while they were able to enact their agency and somewhat detach themselves from State expectations, it was the educational institutions, tentacles of the State, and society that were more difficult to reconcile and ultimately navigate. Second, if the participants had to start over again they would still pursue the same path because when they compared themselves to non-*Sharifis* the participants believed they were in a better position even within these parameters. The participants' rationale was these parameters existed for everyone but since they obtained a degree from Sharif, that offered them an easier path to leave Iran if their aspirational pursuits continued to be blocked within the country. Third, the participants did not believe that the ease in which they could

leave Iran negated their criticism of the struggles they encountered when trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran because none of them had the intention of attending Sharif in order to leave their country. In fact, they saw their intent to migrate as a failure in not being able to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran and help their country.

7.2 A *khodi* vs *ghayre-khodi* tension in the job market

The significance of the concepts *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi* were introduced in the previous two chapters regarding the *konkur* mafia during pre-university, and Sharif's mafia maintaining the status quo within the university. It was also briefly mentioned in the prior section in relation to the participants' perception of the *khodi*'s monopolization of the job market. However, given the extent to which the participants' struggled in realizing their own professional aspirations inside Iran was influenced by their tension with the *khodi*, requires further examination. According to the participants, the *khodi* primarily consisted of individuals who had some sort of affiliation – either directly or indirectly through employment, family, partnership, or allegiance – with the State and/or government. The *ghayre-khodi* was everyone else – including the participants. The aforementioned lived experiences from Karim regarding a job interview process, or Nader with the Revolutionary Guard Corps, were their examples of this *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* tension. Darius also had an interesting perspective:

> **Darius:** I might have felt that I am one of the ghayre-khodi because the decisions that were being made at the low and high levels of society are by the State … my needs were never realized. No one has paid any attention that such a person has the right to exist and live … (laughs) … everything is unstable here and it is not clear at all if something is going to happen or not. Therefore these things … give off a bad feeling throughout society, all the time. Just like what they did some time ago by disconnecting the internet for a week after the protests started. A person who belonged to the khodi group might have been on Twitter during that time, (laughs) … so he might have been connected to the internet.
>
> **Reza**: How does this make you feel?
>
> **Darius**: It is so natural that it doesn't make me feel anything. This is quite widespread in Iran, (laughs) … which has made the people get use to this. But you know what? As [one of your stakeholders said] … it's only difficult for the first 40 days (laughs) …

> because we grew up in this environment, we know that there is no need to compare [khodi versus ghayre-khodi]. He is talking about one thing over there and over here it is something completely different and these two things are not supposed to have any relationship with each other whatsoever (laughs). They are like two different islands (laughs) which are disconnected from each other, and it is so natural that no one even talks about it.

Thus, the participants believed the *khodi* opposed, and at times blocked, their attempts in trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. As a result of this tension, the participants believed their occupational options were limited within a set framework that was pushing them back towards the one-dimensional pathway. In other words, they had to graduate from higher education, complete their *sarbazi*, find an acceptable job in accordance with the *khodi*'s parameters, buy a house, get married, have kids, live a quiet life, and the end. According to the participants, certain parts of this pathway did not pertain to members of the *khodi*, however. Similar to Cyrus' *konkur* example in chapter five on how a fellow test-taker was accepted into Sharif because his father was a member of the *khodi*, avoiding the *sarbazi*, obtaining a higher education degree, and getting a job that might be outside the *khodi*'s parameters bore a similar path.

Therefore, the participants felt that at the end of the one-dimensional pathway was a ceiling to which they were unable to ascend beyond. Cyrus provided a first-hand account with one of his employers and three of his own failed startups that highlighted the tension with the *khodi* and the ceiling that capped his professional growth:

> **Cyrus:** Working in [redacted for safety reasons] needs ten years working at least, and that's if the State doesn't get you down and give you a rough time and if they don't pull the rug out from under you; including many ministries and other organizations, I mean Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, State-newspapers bothered us, and State-TV and radio bothered us, they gave us all kinds of nonsense, first, they stigmatized us as Israeli, they stigmatized us that "you want to [] and you want to []". They did everything to make our [company] – which is private – fail, and boost the other [companies] that belong to the State so we cannot sell our [product] so they can seize the market, because when we had our [product] many of the [State's companies] were not selling well … I've told you every name, don't release these names…

> **Reza:** No. If you want, I'll delete them?
>
> **Cyrus:** No, it's not that important … it will be good if they find out something about these things, because they should know private companies that put their whole life in their job and have many employees and they became miserable, it is their fault; We all killed ourselves to serve our country and again you don't want us [to work in our country].

After this company went bankrupt, Cyrus took some time to personally recover. He decided to pursue a master's in IT management in order to learn and grow "so I can at least better handle the problems our CEO faced … so I can learn the business aspect and also marketing, management, accounting, economy … I wanted to be well rounded, so I don't fail as easily". Towards the end of his master's program he began his first startup:

> Once our work got a little famous and had good sales, the municipality came and made our lives a living hell. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance came and stopped us. [] [Department] prevented our products from being distributed. They came and said "if you want to work it is ok, you have to give us a bribe and this much of your profits you have to give to us". We gave them some of our profits, but it kept increasing, they wanted more, they wanted more, and we couldn't. I mean when the guy comes and says, "give me 30% of your profit" and I say 30% of the profit?! We are a team for one and half years … working to the bone with this hope that this profit will come so this money will be year-to-year. This is not even important to them … "you now have the strength, if you want to make money you have to give me money. If you give it, come and work. You don't give it to me we won't allow you to work". […] They were State-owned organizations. The municipality, Ministry of Health and Medical Education, all of them belonged to the State. *Cyrus*

After his first startup went bankrupt, Cyrus had an idea for a phone application:

> I worked on [a phone app] for a while … nothing. We went a little forward, the Ministry of Health [said] "no, you don't have permission, you have no right to do this, we won't permit you to do such a thing. We will stop you if you want to do it. You have no right to…" I told him sir, it's ok if there's a financial profit, I'll give you a percentage. "Forget about it, this is a monopoly, and we won't let you". And that's why he rejected me. This was an idea I'm sure it will be very successful, and it operates in other countries. Originally the idea was not mine and I knew it was in other countries, but I tried very hard to indigenize it and I was sure it would be successful, but they clearly won't let me. *Cyrus*

After being denied the access and support to build this application, Cyrus tried again with a different phone application that he, again, learned from other countries.

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> They took the idea from us – we made a complete presentation for them to invest. They didn't give us money. They gave it someone else to make it for themselves. I was so shocked. We worked on it so much. […] these ones, these ones []. Look, we were not able to do it by ourselves, this process needs a lot of money around 800-900 million [Toman] investment, we are three youth who don't have 800-900 million [Toman]. Someone should invest in our idea and we tell him ok this amount of profit will be yours, everywhere does such a thing like a startup accelerator … or [an] angel [investor] … nothing … he came, he saw the idea and gave it to another and that is it (repeatedly wipes his hands to indicate it is over). He said why should I give it to you? I'll give it to someone else to do it. There is such an embezzlement market. Also, here the NDA laws are … not confidential. He steals, who are you going to sue? What are you going to say? No one pursues it, and no one cares, someone has stolen your idea, do you think it's important for anyone? No! You think you can sue a big company? Now, I don't know if I should say the name of the [company] … they stole our idea, that con-man! … For example, you can't go to a big [company] and sue them. Who's going to listen to the words of three kids? *Cyrus*

While Cyrus was provided the space to explore his entrepreneurial ambitions, he experienced certain parameters and stipulations he felt he had to abide by in order to ensure the longevity of his startup. These entailed: (a) morally questionable actions – like bribery – that he was not willing to commit; (b) the forfeiture of a percentage stake in his company which he was willing to do but was either taken advantage of or rejected; or (c) denial from initially entering a market that was monopolized by the *khodi*. The tension between Cyrus striving to achieve his professional aspirations inside Iran versus the tentacles of the State – i.e., the *khodi* and *khusulati* – trying to either control or terminate his startup(s) shaped his professional aspirations back into the one-dimensional aspiration that was pushed on him since his pre-university time.

The frustration and exhaustion in Cyrus' voice after repeated attempts at trying to realize his professional aspirations inside Iran was further aggravated when we spoke of other startups that turned into lucrative companies: *Snapp* (Iran's equivalent to Uber), *Tap30* (Lyft), *DigiKala* (Amazon), *Namava* (Netflix), *Divar* (Ebay), and *Café Bazar* (Apple App Store). Cyrus believed the reasons why these organizations succeeded, and his startups did not was due to the intention of the company. Although these corporations offered a service to its customers, like ride-hailing, online shopping or streaming, Cyrus' startups had either a humanitarian

element or he was trying to enter a market monopolized by the *khodi*. His experiences were similar to Ismail's prior statement that "if one were to work for or own a company that sells/provides goods/services they would be left alone and could potentially live a comfortable life". Although Ismail was referring to brick and mortar establishments, these examples were the tech equivalents. When I asked the participants why they chose not to pursue such a career where "they would be left alone", Cyrus replied "that is where I ended up". Darius and Ismail – who were on their way out of Iran – and Karim and Nader – who were working on leaving – explained that if they had a better chance of realizing their professional aspirations outside of Iran then there was no reason why they should not try.

What resulted from this tension between the participants and the *khodi* was the perception that if they wanted to start a company there were preconditions they had to agree to. First, their company's mission statement should be focused on selling/providing a product/service for the purpose of making a monetary profit. Second, they should not enter a market/industry that the *khodi* controlled – in other words, the monopolized sectors mentioned above. Third, if their company had the potential to be or become lucrative, influential, and/or grow/expand into a larger company they should expect the *khodi*'s involvement in some capacity – either through profit sharing, or a minority or majority ownership. The lucrative companies mentioned above were prime examples of these preconditions.

7.2.1 *Khusulati*

One outcome from the third precondition of the *khodi*'s involvement in one's company was the creation of a *khusulati* company. This term was mostly colloquial as well as ubiquitous. The word *khusulati* is a combination of two Persian words: *khususi* (private) and *dolati* (government). *Khusulati* organizations primarily consisted of the *dolati* portion: current, former, and/or retired State/government officials, members of their family, friends, and/or associates. And the *khususi* portion: some individual(s) with no ties to the State or government.

The participants also explained that the reshaping of ownership to include the *khodi*, and thus creating a *khusulati* organization, transpired primarily for two reasons: financial security and national security. Cyrus gave himself as an example:

> Either you go to them for financial help because there was no one else with as much capital to help you, or they find you and make you join them. And if you don't, they do whatever they can so you don't succeed or they take your idea for themselves. *Cyrus*

Moreover, because of sanctions, the financial aspect was often tied with national security, so the *khodi* could continue to maintain control over the country. For example, Darius explained how "Snapp and Tap30 could have easily been shut down by the State when taxi drivers protested". However, because they used GPS tracking, and their American counterparts (Uber and Lyft) were multi-billion dollar companies, the State saw *Snapp* and *Tap30* as a steady stream of revenue and a security advantage in monitoring its citizens.

Karim, for example, ended up working for one of the aforementioned companies as a data analyst and did not believe it was *khusulati* because, as he put it, it was publicly traded on Iran's stock market. I made the counterargument that *Iran Khodro* – the State-owned automotive company – was also a publicly traded company, to which he replied with uncertainty that he heard rumors that the State was involved but was unconcerned by it. Cyrus briefly worked as a project manager (a higher position than Karim) for the same company, and his response was interesting:

> [It is not private] no, it is another company that the Revolutionary Guard Corps interferes in. These [companies] that are so large, have like a million [US dollar] per day sales record, those [companies] that can sell million [dollars] per day they are definitely connected [to the State]. *Cyrus*

I asked Karim if he believed he had a future at this company. He admitted there was most likely a "limit to how high" he can go but added that he intended to move on to a better job, if there was one, or leave the country. The more experience the participants gained within the job

market the better they understood the parameters within which they could navigate and exert their agency to try to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. This understanding came with the increasing realization that their own individual aspirations were unlikely to be discovered inside Iran. Nevertheless, the participants understood the limits and ceiling – especially as *ghayre-khodi* individuals who were unwilling to compromise on their principles and morals – and still tried to maximize on the allowable opportunities in order to achieve their professional aspirations inside Iran.

7.2.2 The one-dimensional pathway

One option for the participants within the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* tension of the job market was the continued push towards the one-dimensional pathway. Darius explained his lived experiences with the one-dimensional option:

> The current activities in the country … because they are very old-fashioned and outdated, there aren't many places for people who are multi-dimensional and are able to do multiple tasks. They want people who are able to work on one thing. […] There were some people … I saw them … who would do certain repeated tasks and are in the same position doing the same job for 15 years […] mechanical engineering … in general, we are not in a good position in Iran's industry. I use to think that when I have gained experience in different areas, it is going to be an advantage for me, but it is the opposite here because they expect you to continue in a straight line … in most places … I am not saying it is like this everywhere, but in most places it is like this … this one-dimensionality starts from elementary school and continues … until the end… Everyone wants you to be one-dimensional because they are limiting the environment every day. *Darius*

With the exception of Cyrus, the participants were not interested in entrepreneurial endeavors, so their occupational options were further limited to employment jobs. Another influence that shaped the participants' professional aspirations was their tension with the manifestations of a societal discourse telling them to follow the one-dimensional pathway. As Darius explained above, "no one has paid any attention that such a person has the right to exist and live". In other words, the participants felt that society would tell them to just find any job, instead of examining the situation to determine why they were struggling in the job market.

For example, the participants would hear the people around them say "you're not going to become rich overnight", "don't expect someone to hire you to a senior level position just because you graduated from Sharif", or "just get in and work your way up". Thus, they were told to "just find any job". The participants felt there was a dismissive sentiment from society that they "just complained too much and wanted everything handed to them without putting in the work". This tension resided in these debates where on the one hand the participants did not object to starting at the bottom, working hard, and ascending in their career. But on the other hand, they had not experienced such an approach leading to the outcome they were told. What the participants reported experiencing entailed the stipulations and conditions mentioned above which they were not willing to participate in. The participants' frustration while detailing their story with the hopes of me understanding their experiences reminded me of a Karl Menninger quote, it is difficult for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked fish.

When Darius said the one-dimensionality was not like that everywhere, he gave entrepreneurship as an example – one aspect of the job market he was not interested in because of the high risk and chance of failure within Iran. Cyrus, however, was an entrepreneur, but explained his experience above and as a result became very frustrated and tired:

> They won't let you ... this is generally their goal. Either be a good-for-nothing, ordinary person and live in this society, or you have to go abroad. I said that most of my friends had applied and none of them stayed in Iran. If you even have a little ability, go abroad. Don't stay in Iran. Why stay? You're not going to do anything special here. "Either you become an ordinary person, making ends meet, minding your own business, having a dead-end job, and we have nothing to do with you. If you want to do something important, go abroad, this is not the place for such a thing, or we will knock you down". *Cyrus*

Eventually Cyrus settled for a job so he could start his life, i.e. get married, buy a house, have children. He did not categorize it as a dead-end job, and while he did enjoy it, Cyrus admitted to his unhappiness with where his professional career had ended up. Even with the struggles he experienced, and ultimately settling for the one-dimensional path, Cyrus did not want to

leave Iran. He was adamant about helping his fellow citizens and loathed the idea of going to another country and helping them prosper when he saw so many problems to remedy inside Iran. At the end of our time together, I asked Cyrus if he ever thought about starting another company that did fall within the *khodi* parameters of the job market. He thought about it but was unsure due to the negative experiences he had as well as his weariness in possibly having to confront similar limitations again:

> How long can one put up with this? In my case, I put up with it for a while, then I couldn't. It's not possible anymore. Forget about it. I don't want it anymore. And no one wants you to have it either. And no one values what you can bring [to society]. No one respects you. You can't live in this. I can't take it anymore. Bye! Let it go! I don't care about whatever is going to happen. I'll do what I want to do. Forget about serving our nation and that stuff. I use to be very determined, and I wanted to serve but we're all ending up in failure and no one wants it any ways … They don't allow it. They always stall you. No one lets you grow. There is a reason for this, too. If <u>you</u> become powerful, <u>they</u> make a loss. *Cyrus*

Ismail, also failed with his startup – like Cyrus – and felt he was denied the realization of his professional aspirations through employment – like Darius – and as a result became uncompromising with his decision to leave Iran. As he looked back on his life, he recalled the broken promises he was given:

> [They say] you just finish your studies, do your internship, and when you graduate, you will be employed somewhere, and you can start working there. But it didn't happen for me and for many students who were studying in Sharif University. *Ismail*

What was notable about Ismail – as well as Darius and Karim – wanting to leave Iran was while they distanced themselves from the one-dimensional pathway they eventually followed what appeared to be a different pathway that also correlated with the *khodi*'s monopolization of the job market and their formation of *khusulati* companies for national security reasons. In other words, individuals like Ismail, Darius, and Karim who initially intended to engender constructive change through their profession felt (a) inhibited from realizing that professional aspiration and (b) encouraged by society and the people in their lives to leave Iran. The

participants likened their experience to individuals who were overtly encouraged to leave Iran due to their attempts in engendering change. Darius gave the example of a ministry advisor who was invited to Iran from England to implement certain changes but later fled the country because of the severe opposition he faced by the *khodi* when trying to help. However, if someone like Cyrus would not leave, they were pushed towards the one-dimensional path or worse. Karim gave the example of the Sharif professor who was "genuinely compassionate about" improving Sharif but was eventually forced into retirement.

7.2.3 Reaching the ceiling of an uncertain job market

Nader, on the other hand, was uncertain about his future so he followed what others were doing and stayed on the one-dimensional pathway:

> I was looking for a job for a while. Some, um, like a year or more … looking for a job related to mechanical engineering. Well I was not so successful. I did not find the job I was looking for. Um, then, um, I decided to pursue an MBA … because like I said based on what I saw from mechanical engineering, it really did not have a good job market, I decided to study a major other than mechanical engineering. Like I said, maybe it was just the atmosphere that everyone went towards studying MBA. *Nader*

Of the five participants, Ismail was the only one who did not complete a master's program but did complete his *sarbazi*. The other participants received their MBA, and as Nader explained, "the atmosphere that everyone went towards studying MBA" was reminiscent of their pre-university time when they followed the path of engineering at Sharif. Karim made this connection when he complained about the difficulties in trying to realize his aspirations:

> [For most of Sharif] I can say I almost had no understanding of myself. I didn't know my values, it was a broad thing, it was a vague thing … it's something that everyone says, and it had become a cliché, but I wasn't my real self, the self that I liked, because this force has always been present, it is present now, if you look around its examples are even in the master's. Like I told you one of the most on-demand courses now is MBA. If you ask MBAers, they don't even know what they want from their future, what they are going to do in the future, what's their aspirations, we don't have introspection at all, what are our values, maybe they don't give us a chance to think. *Karim*

Karim's point about continuously feeling the force of following a one-dimensional path that led to uncertainties about the future, aspirations, and the self was experienced by the participants to some degree. Cyrus' startup failures forced him to settle for a job. Ismail's failed startup and belief that the job market primarily consisted of unmeaningful, unthreatening dead-end jobs convinced him to leave the country. Karim almost dropped out of his MBA program because he reached the same realization as Ismail but decided to finish as he prepared to leave. Nader's uncertainties left him to follow his peers, but like Karim, in preparation to leave Iran. Darius struggled to reconcile the conflict of needing to find a job – at the very least – with wanting to leave the country. Regarding finding a job, Darius did not want to lie during job interviews if asked if he intended to leave Iran. However, the job offers he did receive were the routine, dead-end jobs similar to what Ismail described.

The participants felt that the more time they spent in the job market the more difficult it was to believe that they were in more control of their decision making. Simultaneously, the participants felt they were still following a *khodi* constructed pathway. Cyrus, for example, described how at the end of his within-university time he attended the Sharif Career School where he participated in personality tests to "uncover what my interests were, and what my abilities were". During his post-graduation time, he continued, intensified, and diversified his efforts:

> I also attended BLS which is a business program in Sharif University. Bootstrapped Lean Start-ups. It was for start-up businesses. I have attended many programs. For example, I attended MBA programs and at the end [of my bachelors], I was holding some business programs myself … making resumes, we had such classes in the career school. For example, three or four sessions we allocated to learning how to write a resume. And … I have attended many personality programs in which you work on yourself. Classes in which they would teach us how to recognize different personality types. Although my mom was a psychologist, I attended many psychology classes … many of them. I have always been doing something. [Networking] with my friends who know a company or … Job Vision … do you know it? [Reza: They help you find a job?] Yeah, it's similar to Iran Talent. I have posted my resume there. I have posted my resume everywhere. In LinkedIn, Iran Talent. My resume is everywhere. There is a job fair in Sharif University every year and I use to go to all the stations to fill in the forms

> and my major was needed by everyone. For example, the job was related to chemistry or mechanics, but they still needed someone from computer engineering. *Cyrus*

The extent to which Cyrus multitasked his efforts during his post-graduation time in order to increase his chances to either realize his professional aspirations, at the most, or find a job, at the least, cannot be overstated. At any given moment he was engaged in at least three endeavors but ultimately settled for a job so he could try to build a family and a future. Nader, on the other hand, simply applied for a few jobs on the social media channels of Iran Talent and Job Vision. Between the five participants, no two individuals were as different as Cyrus and Nader: from their socio-economic status and work ethic to their outlook on life and aspirations. However, none of that seemed to matter as they both ended up in the same place: working at companies just to make a living and start the next stage of their life, and not spending any more time on what they felt was the losing end of a battle against the manifestations of societal discourse vis-à-vis the *khodi* and *khusulati*. One difference, however, was Nader's intention to leave Iran.

Darius was influenced by the people around him, and that affected his level of commitment and intensity in which he applied himself towards any given task. During his pre- and within-university time he was fortunate enough to depend on his intellect. For example, his fellow Olympians insulted and excluded him, but he ranked higher (silver medal) than most of them; or, two of his roommates at Sharif battled extreme depression, but his GPA (17 out of 20) remained one of the highest in his department (mechanical engineering). However, when he reached his post-graduation time, Darius had strengthened his self-confidence and was applying himself more in areas where he previously might not have.

> **Darius:** Generally speaking, I think that I have some advantages in interacting with people in comparison to others. Generally, when I see the people around me, I feel that I am more patient and can get along with others better. I am not saying that I am the (laughs) master of soft skills, no … but I try to improve them every day, if possible.
>
> **Reza:** From 1 to 10 … [your self-confidence] it reaches 1, 2 or 3 but … you don't let it hold you back, make you hopeless for example or, I don't know, regret…

> **Darius**: Yeah, what happens is that it causes me to change my environment because I have learned it, for example, to work with different people and in different environments.

Interestingly, Ismail possessed these attributes since his pre-university time. One example he constantly gave of his arrogance and confidence was his seventeen-year-old-self dropping out of pre-university high school to study on his own for the *konkur*. He also pushed himself further than the other participants by taking master-level courses during his undergrad in attempts to better understand what path to take in order to realize his professional aspirations. He then attended job fairs, conferences, and exhibitions. I asked him to describe that experience:

> **Ismail:** When I went to job interviews … after some time, I realized that there were some other things that … as I said, there are some other factors that you should know, be familiar with, learn … I searched for some of them on the internet or if there was a course that was useful, I would have taken it.
>
> **Reza:** Did you make all the efforts that you could in order to be successful in finding a job in Iran?
>
> **Ismail:** Yeah, I think so … I think that I made enough efforts.
>
> **Reza:** Did you do all you could?
>
> **Ismail:** Almost, yeah.
>
> **Reza:** Almost?
>
> **Ismail:** Almost, not completely. Almost.
>
> **Reza:** Why not completely?
>
> **Ismail:** As I said, I always consider 10% for myself. Procrastination, laziness, lack of motivation. For example, there are some people who would try again even if they got rejected from 10 places, 20 places, 100 places. They try so hard until they succeed, maybe I wasn't like this, but I have tried enough, I think.

Darius was one of those people. He recalled applying or sending his resume for two hundred job openings. He also attended job fairs and conferences while seeking advice from his former professors and peers. He also participated in a training-ship program (sponsored by the Sharif Career School) – he described it as one level below an internship where the company "prepares you for entering the work environment" – but was not hired afterwards for the company's internship program. He explained how discouraged he got: "I really felt that I cannot find what

I want here … and no one wants me for any job." Although Ismail was ahead of Darius regarding their agency, and Darius was more persistent in strengthening his employability, the two ended up in the same place: confronted with the barriers, limitations, and difficulties of navigating the uncertain job market of Iran and deciding to leave their country.

While Karim was also making plans to leave the country, he initially tried to achieve his professional aspirations inside Iran:

> **Karim**: I get upset, not because that person became successful but why I haven't, we were almost in the same situation
>
> **Reza**: What happens after you get upset?
>
> **Karim**: I decide that, tomorrow, with strength, to sit and work harder
>
> **Reza**: So, you become more energized?
>
> **Karim**: To continue with strength. I certainly get upset.
>
> **Reza**: But you don't let it keep you down?
>
> **Karim**: Yeah, I don't let it.
>
> **Reza**: Why do you think they reached whatever it was they wanted sooner than you?
>
> **Karim**: Like I said, people's background is really important, but you shouldn't compare this part with yourself. You must compare … efficiency, I compared myself and was like maybe my efficiency is low, maybe my problem solving is low, my attention is low. This comparison causes me see these in myself … I analyze myself, not others.

He gave the example of his job as a data analyst, which was offered to him on his second attempt. After his first rejection, Karim identified his weaknesses and worked harder in strengthening them:

> I was rejected at [] when I went for an interview for a data analyst position. So, I was like let's look at major companies to see what they want and become strong in them so I have the requirements so no one can reject me here. So, I went on LinkedIn and looked at IBM, Amazon, and major companies to see what their data analyst has, and I learned them. I looked for all these one by one and planned for all of them one by one and I started learning these one by one. And I don't have a problem now. *Karim*

In the process of strengthening his weaknesses, Karim was also discovering that his professional future may not be in Iran. His explanation showed an internalized thought process

of determination to improve his situation within the job market, but also uncertainty about his future and whether he could achieve his professional aspirations inside Iran:

> In Iran … if I say no … it actually isn't … the ceiling ... it depends … on the person. I myself … don't think so … I don't think … with this ... not that I don't think, but it is a bit far away and it is a bit difficult. *Karim*

The confusion in how he answered the question about the possibility of realizing his professional aspirations inside Iran signified the struggle that the participants experienced. If I were to fill in the blanks using other parts of the conversation with Karim his answer could read like this:

> In Iran … if I say no [it is because] it actually isn't [possible because of] the ceiling [in place preventing you, but] it depends … on the person. I myself … don't think so … I don't think … with this [environment I can reach my aspirations] ... not that I don't think, but it is a bit far away and it is a bit difficult.

The ceiling Karim mentioned was in reference to the barriers and obstacles he experienced at the end of his one-dimensional journey in the job market that he believed denied him the realization of his professional aspirations, as well as the continued push to remain on the one-dimensional pathway. Cyrus spoke of it as "they hit you on the head" if you want to try to succeed past a certain point or within a certain industry. Ismail also called it a ceiling and referenced it when describing the limit placed on wages – the next section will discuss this further. Darius called it a wall and explained that by the time you realize it exists it was too late because you were too old (towards the end of their bachelors) to make the necessary adjustments (like choose a different university, major, and/or path). As a result of Nader's aimless ascension, dispassionate pursuits, and subsequent uncertainty during his post-graduation time he did not experience this ceiling like the other participants but did explain that "the ceiling would be invisible, like not everybody can see it, only when you get there you see that okay for this reason I cannot prosper anymore".

In addition to the aforementioned barriers, the participants also discussed their own shortcomings and failures in how and why they felt unable to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. During the moments in our conversations when each participant internalized their assessment of their situation I asked them how much they held themselves accountable for not achieving their professional aspirations inside Iran. Nader believed 50% of his inability to realize his professional aspirations inside Iran was his fault. He described how his soft-spoken and introverted demeanor, as well as his apathy towards most disciplines, were a detriment to his initial professional pursuits. However, as he worked on strengthening these weaknesses, and improving his employability, the parameters within which his agency could be manifested was still limited by the *khodi* and *khusulati*. In other words, the participants' believed their tension with the *khodi*, their monopolistic sentiments, and their aim for *khusulati* expansion, continued to push them towards the unhealthy environments of the job market that tried to keep them one-dimensional and within the ceiling that prevented the *ghayre-khodi* from posing any real threat to the *khodi*'s power and control over the country.

Similarly, Karim saw himself at 60% responsible for not achieving his professional aspirations inside Iran. This was evident in the detailed steps he took to strengthen his weaknesses, as well as how he articulated the struggles he endured and eventually overcame:

> I, back then [pre-university and within-university], thought things are out of my hands but it was internal … an inner control that I had but I thought it was from the outside [that was affecting me]. If I want to talk about it now, many in our university think the situation in the country is [because of external problems], there's no job, there's threat of war and so forth, well this … the media is constantly sending negativity … this can't be controlled. You can't control these at all and since you don't have control you feel helpless. When I think back I see I've changed so much. I mean I completely changed at Sharif. But we see how the developed countries are teaching [to look inward] at a younger age, I mean it's extremely effective if you know these since childhood. But in Iran I can say 60% of people don't know this. *Karim*

Karim was the only participant to identify, understood, conceptualized, and explained his situation using such terms. He also blamed himself the most, out of the five participants.

However, the realizations he reached about his future in Iran did not greatly differ from the other participants – even if the other participants did not devote the same level of research or shoulder the same level of responsibility as Karim. Ismail, for example, felt 10% to blame because of his "procrastination, laziness, [or] lack of motivation". Ismail was a stark contrast to Karim as he felt the least responsible and examined his situation with empirical evidence rather than literature:

> Reza, imagine … imagine that you want to … there is a road which turns right and left. The left side … your friends, not just one person, not just me … 10, 20, 30, 100 people keep telling you Reza don't go this way. It has some problems. The road has some problems. I don't know. It doesn't have any lights. The road is not good. You might have an accident. You can't see anywhere. They say that the path on the right is brighter. There is a possibility that … they say we have taken the road and even some say that we have gone beyond this road. Do this. This is a good road. Which path would you take? I am like this too. I tell myself … why should I spend five years of my life in Iran? I ask the people who have done it. *Ismail*

This was Ismail's answer after I continuously challenged him on why he did not apply to more jobs like Darius, or participated in personality and psychological tests like Cyrus, or internalized his failures in search of a deeper understanding like Karim. Interestingly, whenever Ismail would say my name – like in the quote above – that meant he was emphasizing a point that he believed was a certainty for those living in Iran and an aspect of their lives that I needed to understand. Nevertheless, while Ismail took a different approach than Karim, these two participants ended up reaching the same conclusion: in order to increase the probability of realizing their professional aspirations they would need to leave Iran.

Cyrus believed he was 30% to blame, and that was considering the numerous altercations – three times more than the other participants – he had with the *khodi*. He identified moments of weakness where he either lacked motivation, was depressed, lazy, or did not care enough. He also acknowledged he lacked certain business acumen, which led him to pursue his masters. While he believed his efforts in enhancing his employability did afford him certain advantages

in the job market, he also believed there was a ceiling he could not ascend beyond. This was evident in his encounters with the *khodi* and the subsequent failures of his startups.

Darius' self-criticism was closer to Ismail with 15%:

> **Darius:** I think that if I were somewhere else, I wouldn't have had such problems and I can use all of my capabilities in my job.
>
> **Reza:** So far, you haven't found this in Iran?
>
> **Darius:** Not in that sense. Not even close.
>
> **Reza:** Do you think you tried hard enough to find it?
>
> **Darius:** I tried to a great extent.
>
> **Reza:** Are you satisfied with your efforts?
>
> **Darius:** Yeah, because I went everywhere to know what the job market is like. It was a bit annoying … I mean, you know … when someone starts working here [in Iran], nothing is clear about his future. […] you can't go to a job where you can imagine your future and be happy by thinking about the future that you will have.

Although Darius took a different approach than Karim and Ismail, these three participants ended up reaching the same conclusion: in order to increase the probability of realizing their professional aspirations they would need to leave Iran. Darius' example of an unimaginable future further demonstrated the *khodi* constructed ceiling they experienced, which they believed denied them the realization of their professional aspirations inside Iran despite their varying efforts in strengthening their weaknesses and employability.

7.3 Unable to obtain their future inside Iran

Darius' example was not only because the available jobs he was finding could be categorized within the one-dimensional path of routine, dead-end, static, unmeaningful, and unthreatening. He, along with the other participants, provided two timely examples illustrating how and why uncertainties about their future hardened. It started when the State decided to raise gas prices over night with no prior warning to the public:

> Our government … one night in Iran, they announced that fuel prices will go up [the following day]. That same night, people lined up in front of gas stations from downtown and uptown. That night – it was interesting – I left my house, searching Tehran for an hour and half, everywhere was full, people lining up … the government [does this] … I mean … they even line up to buy chicken. *Ismail*

> On Thursday, I went to put gas in my car, I was running low on gas, there was a long line, I said it's okay I'll do it on Friday. The same gas that I wanted to put in on Thursday for 40,000 Toman, I did the next day for 120,000 Toman, the same gas, I am paying three times as much for the same thing, I couldn't believe it, what an awful country! *Cyrus*

As a result, protests ensued with riots, burning of gas stations, and shutting down of major roadways. That was followed by the Revolutionary Guard Corps – the military arm of the State and one main tentacle of the State – policing the streets, cracking down on protestors, and the internet being shut down for one week.

> With the current situation … it's so difficult to stay in a place where you don't have any rights … it is possible that they might disconnect the internet at any moment or whatever … these things make us doubt … they make us think that this place isn't very safe for considering our future because here … before this [internet blackout], there have always been some fluctuations in everything, like social and financial conditions … but it seems that it is not going to be any better from now on. That's why I am leaving. *Darius*

> Oh, that one week when there was an internet blackout? At that time … when there was an internet blackout … I wanted to register for the GRE, and I couldn't … (laughs) I couldn't even register for a test … and after [that week] I worried about my [university] application process … I thought that they would disconnect the internet again. *Ismail*

> Our living standards is much worse than abroad with respect to welfare, with respect to income, but for example, my [former] roommate who is in Canada now, he has a car and a house of his own. He is not worried … about his life expenses. But I, who stayed here, have not yet been able to buy a house or a car. They cut the internet connection one day, then something else happens, you know over there none of this stuff happens. I see that, like, if I had gone as well, by now I would have had a car, a house, a good job. *Nader*

These were real-time lived experiences that I shared with the participants which exemplified their argument that "you cannot make long-term plans in Iran or hope for the future because you sleep and wake up and everything is changed". Thus, each time I argued with the

participants on their criticisms of the job market and society, and proposed alternative views or explanations, and insisted they had opportunities to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran they would respond with the above examples.

With the accumulation of the aforementioned barriers and obstacles, some participants acquiesced to the limitations inside Iran and lowered their aspirations in order to move on to the next stage of their lives.

> I didn't get to my aspirations. I lowered them a lot! I'm very upset. So now I have chosen another path. I said no to my dreams. Look, my top wishes were that I will make it, a house, a car, a wonderful life. Now, not at all … my aspirations … they came down. Like I said I am a simple employee, I want to solve my sarbazi issue, I'd like to get married, and build a normal living. I am happy with it at this point. I am like, well this is good. Because I see that many people don't have this. I see that many of my friends, are getting fired from their work, cannot even have this life. They cannot even make it to this level. So I see that if I can have this level, that would be good. Because I know that the state that I am in is what many people want. *Cyrus*

Cyrus had professional aspirations to contribute towards the betterment of society – as did the other participants. He was not demanding or expecting outcomes like an Amazon or Apple company, nor did he expect to reach such heights overnight. However, at the least, he hoped that the ideas he had and the startups he built would be allowed to run their course – success or failure. He understood the small likelihood of succeeding but took the steps he felt were necessary in strategically positioning himself to have the best possibility for success. However, when his investments in himself (Sharif Career School, MBA, personality and psychological tests, startup workshops) were made to feel inconsequential because of the resistance and denial from the *khodi* Cyrus' aspirations lowered, and he eventually capitulated to a "normal life" as a "simple employee", as he put it, which by itself was difficult to attain considering additional factors such as the economy.

7.3.1 Economy

Reaching this point in his professional life, Cyrus arrived where he felt he was pushed towards during his post-graduation time: the one-dimensional pathway of a routine, dead-end unmeaningful and unthreatening job where his focus would be making enough money to start and support a family rather than trying to change the norms of society. This resistance to change, vis-à-vis the job market by the *khodi* was explained by Dr. Mahdi (one of my stakeholders, a government official from a ministry office):

> There is a ceiling ... even for a government official ... unless he tries to work privately, a start-up, a company, something to try to make more money, but even then there are complications in the work environment. The State does not support such business. Conducting business in Iran is complicated, it's difficult, you're not protected, laws change, you can't make long-term plans, there are problems. There is not much support here. There is very high potential in Iran for work. [For example, we have created our own version of Uber with Snapp, or Amazon with DigiKala]. But because of the limitations, barriers, and problems that exist it's almost impossible to do it. I mean that supportive environment does not really exist. *Dr. Mahdi*

One example of the lack of support, or the complications in the work environment that Dr. Mahdi was referencing was low wages. Ismail made an interesting argument:

> **Ismail -** You can't make any progress … you can have an ordinary life. You can be an employee in a company who does his duties very well and earn a relatively good salary. This is achievable even now.
>
> **Reza:** A relatively good salary, what is that, 2, 2.5 million [Toman]?
>
> **Ismail:** Yeah, if your performance is good, it might go up to 4 [million Toman], for example, yeah. So one could let go of the prestige, but what should you really do with the salary? Ok, ok, I accepted this. I accepted to be an average person … like an average person. But what about the salary? The salary is 2 million [Toman]. Salary is 3 million [Toman] … 4. This is a fact. These are facts which have been recorded. You can't do anything about it.

A contextual explanation is needed in order to fully understand the significance of Ismail's comments couched within Dr. Mahdi's statement. According to the participants, the best case scenario monthly income was five million Toman (or $416) – while the more common wage was approximately three million per month. In addition to what Dr. Mahdi explained about a

lack of support – which included seldom promotions and raises – the price of real estate property had increased by 100% from year to year and by 2019 one square meter cost ten million Toman. Thus, for example, the apartment I was renting for three million Toman a month was roughly 100 square meters – a sufficient size for a family of three – worth approximately one billion Toman. Also, mortgage loans do not exist in Iran, which meant one would have to buy such an apartment with cash. That means, if all conditions and variables were held constant with zero expenses, it would take seventeen years to be able to buy that apartment with a monthly income of five million Toman. Furthermore, while wages increase by the Toman, expenses increase by the U.S. Dollar. The currency exchange rate for one U.S. dollar in November 2019 (towards the end of the fieldwork) equaled approximately 12,000 Toman. The average monthly expenses, according to the participants and stakeholders, was six million Toman.

Therefore, the participants' would say, setting aside their professional aspirations it was extremely difficult and often impossible to realize the possibility of owning a home, getting married, having kids, and saving enough money at the end of each month to try to plan for the future when: (a) your income was considered under the poverty line; (b) you were unable to obtain a (mortgage) loan; (c) your wages did not increase or were not adjusted based on performance, profit, inflation; (d) you did not have job security or job growth; (e) the socially accepted norms within society and the job market parameters were greatly influenced by the *khodi*; and (f) the cost of living and monthly expenses drastically fluctuated on a daily basis. Thus, even if the participants lowered their professional aspirations in order to live within the *khodi* parameters of Iran's society, they believed they still faced these additional obstacles.

7.3.2 National security

Local research argued that this process and eventual outcome was the preferred outcome by the *khodi*. In other words, having its citizens constantly struggling to make ends meet which

will keep them preoccupied with their own problems so they did not have the time, energy, and resources to try to change the norms within society and/or confront the *khodi* with their grievances. Cyrus reached this outcome by the end of my time with him:

> I can't take it anymore. Now … I mean once I thought I have a lot of options but I didn't want to pursue them so I could provide a service. Now I have reached a stage where I say (laughs) the hell with it! I don't want to serve [my country]. I should make money and live my life. When no one cares about the country, no one cares about others, and everyone beats you up and doesn't let you work, it means they don't want change. So, forget about it. *Cyrus*

The other participants believed the risks in leaving their country in pursuit of their professional aspirations was less than staying in Iran. Karim and Nader were employed, similar to Cyrus, but with the intention of leaving. Darius received his university acceptance letter (from abroad) but still had a dilemma:

> My main mentality is to find my profession over there … after that, whether I come back or not … since my mentality now is not on immigrating. That is, I don't want to do it with the intension to stay [there] … I'm not for sure because my situation is not the same in two continuous days; I mean, because there is no trust in the future here, you cannot even have a long-term plan. *Darius*

Ismail only had the travel arrangements left to make but saw his departure from Iran as a failure to not have been able to reach his professional aspirations inside Iran. On numerous occasions he made the pull or push argument about leaving Iran and strongly felt that he was being pushed to leave his country instead of the enticement from a foreign nation pulling him in:

> Yes, definitely [I see it as a failure]. Yeah, like I said before, I didn't want to leave Iran. But … it's pointless. It's like you're wearing away. Staying in Iran and working like this. No, no. I don't agree with this. *Ismail*

Karim had an interesting description of how one can overcome these barriers:

> You are under attack constantly […] you have to vaccinate [yourself] because it's always under attack from the one-dimensional frontlines of society, news, media, twitter, WhatsApp, telegram, they constantly … surround you and the person should vaccinate their mind … because media is always saying like the currency value dropped, property [value] increased, automobile [value] increased I don't know …

> especially in Iran it's pretty common (laughs) it's economic stability is pretty low. This negativity is being constantly injected in you that you can't do anything, it's out of your hand. But I can change myself, as much as I can, I can academically bring myself up so I can change myself maybe. *Karim*

As the participants moved through these moments in their lives, painting a grim future inside Iran, I asked them how so many Iranians were able to become either financially comfortable, professionally successful, and/or able to sustain a livelihood with a wife and kid(s). The participants' explanations revolved around four points. First, one's financial, professional, and domestic securities was realized through their family's wealth if it was built prior to the 1979 revolution and secured thereafter (Cyrus was an example of this). This first point was accompanied with certain stipulations, however. Primarily those families whose assets were procured independent of the Monarchy were able to hold on to their wealth. Depending on the family's relational proximity to the Pahlavi Dynasty or opposition to the new regime, the Islamic Republic would have either confiscated their assets and left them impoverished, or they would have either gone missing, fled the country, or been imprisoned or worse.

Second, "those who are a part of the system are well off", the participants would say. The three prime examples they gave were *khusulati* entities, the *mafia*, and the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* dynamic. This meant that if you had close ties with the State – whether that was through employment, marriage, blood relation, or business ventures – you were financially comfortable – in some instances, the land and assets taken from the families mentioned in point one were allocated to the families with close ties to the Islamic Republic. The participants went on to say that although these families were financially comfortable, it did not necessarily mean they were professionally successful because employment in and through the *khodi*-operated companies was based on ideology, nepotism, favoritism, and *khodi* affiliation.

Third, many of the individuals who went missing, fled the country, or were imprisoned during the rise of the Islamic Republic were individuals whose profession aimed at improving society

through academia, civil society, social work, human rights, and political engagement (Bayat, 2009). Although the participants' view on improving society was through a scientific lens, the obstacles in realizing their professional aspirations were the same. As explained above by the participants, there was much resistance to change in Iran from the institutions and people within the educational and governmental sectors. This dilemma also connected to the fourth point.

Their fourth point stressed the issue that the vast majority of Iranians were struggling to sustain an independent livelihood, let alone one with a wife and kid(s). The participants explained that if you do not fall under either of the above three categories – and if you were not a medical doctor or dentist – then "you live hand-to-mouth" either as an employee for a company or as a small business owner – the latter, typically selling consumer goods or services to customers in the retail industry. While they acknowledged these four points cannot explain the entire country in a general sense, they argued that the exceptions I may find further support the rule they were arguing. The participants also acknowledged that some small business owners can become financially comfortable, professionally successful, and/or able to sustain a livelihood for a wife and kid(s). However, their counter argument was, this was not what they aspired towards; they wanted to advance society in a way that "improved our way of life". Furthermore, the participants had no objections in becoming an employee for a company and starting from the bottom with a low wage as long as there was hope for job growth, and a contribution to society, but according to the participants, there rarely was – and that connected back to the resistance to change in Iran from the *khodi*.

This resulted to their fifth point, which was leaving Iran. The participants accepted the argument that there were problems everywhere in the world, and certain notions that once were guarantees – such as job security, job growth, wage increases – were no longer the norms in the job market. However, the participants compared their situation with Iranians who had left the country and the latter comparatively became more financially comfortable, professionally

successful, able to sustain a livelihood for a wife and kid(s), and/or realized their professional aspirations. The difference for the participants resided in the institutions they had to navigate. The participants' argument was, although problems existed everywhere, a country like America had a more sophisticated legal and judicial system that supported workers' rights when compared to Iran. There were freedoms in America that allowed one to prosper as long as they worked hard and obeyed the law. According to the participants, the extent of such freedoms either did not exist in Iran or were only available to a small portion of society like the *khodi*. In other words, in developed nations – within a European or North American-centered context, for example – the State is more fluid in its relationship with its citizenry, which allows the agency of an individual to be shown more in its recursive relationship with the institutions they navigate. Within the Iranian context, however, the participants seem to have a tense relationship with not-so-fluid tentacles of the State. The participants argued that the American notion of "you can become anything you want as long as you work hard" being instilled in so many children from a young age helped with their academic and professional maturation. As opposed to the participants being told to not worry about their future, that God will provide, and to focus on the short-term; and then experiencing their aspirations being formed for them to where they felt they were unable to explore, identify, and achieve their aspirations inside Iran.

7.4 Conclusion

In summary, the participants detailed how their professional aspirations were shaped as a result of the tensions with the *khodi*. They illustrated the highly-centralized context they experienced which they felt opposed their pursuits in realizing their professional aspirations inside Iran despite their efforts in strengthening their weaknesses, and employability. The participants also illustrated a temporal significance regarding an unhealthy job market and social context that continued to push the one-dimensional aspiration on them. One way this push was effective

was due to the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* dynamic. For example, business opportunities through *khusulati* companies were reported to garner easier investments, licenses, as well as support and approval by the *khodi*.

Moreover, the participants' lived experiences throughout their post-graduation time also demonstrated a complex dichotomy where they tried to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran while also trying to avoid the one-dimensional path. According to the participants, as a *ghayre-khodi,* the time and effort they placed on enhancing their employability would eventually be counteracted by the ceiling that would then lead the participants to either acquiesce a job with very limited professional and/or financial growth or leave the country. The following vignette from Cyrus' experiences and perceptions summarizes these post-graduation experiences:

> I don't believe you! A good idea, a profitable idea, a humanitarian idea will grow roots. Why wouldn't it work here if the people need it? You must've done something wrong. I'll show you!!
>
> I'm depressed…I try, and I try, and I try…{sigh}…and I try…I'm tired. You tell me, "Cyrus, don't fret. Your time will come, just keep working hard. You'll get there." I have! Believe me, I have. I don't know anymore…{sigh}…I don't know.
>
> My life is shit! Don't tell me, "Cyrus, be grateful for what you have". I am! Believe me, I am. But when you scour the bowels of this country in pursuit of alleviating mechanisms to stimulate your advancements only to end up where you started…well…then I guess I'm grateful that my predicament is less shitty than the next guy.
>
> I stop trying; you call it compromising. I've erased my aspirations; you call it being realistic. I point out the problems we have; you call it whining. How can we change things if you don't believe me? *Cyrus*

As the participants accepted a certain level of blame for not achieving their professional aspirations inside Iran, their maturation as a result led them to the realization that although they have more power and control over their lives then they initially thought, there were limits inside Iran to the extent to which they could manifest their agency and employability and be in control in shaping and realizing their own professional aspirations inside Iran.

Chapter 8. Discussion

This study investigated the lived experiences and aspirations of five young men who attended Sharif University and offered an insight into the way State control impacted the academic and professional trajectory and maturation of these men. The State's tentacles of influence – i.e., the *khodi* and *khusulati* – also played a dominant role in this regard. As elucidated in the Methodology chapter, the present study collected the socially-constructed perspectives of the five participants using a biographical approach. My investigation was guided by the question of how have Sharif graduates' professional aspirations been shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences? The findings of the study revealed that a State or government, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran – which has been debated as an authoritarian and oligarchical State (Azimi, 2009) – can reframe promises of human capital theory and employability to reduce its graduates to a one-dimensional aspiration irrespective of how much the participants invested in capitals and improved their employability.

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in light of the literature overviewed in the Literature Review chapter. In section one I discuss the role of the State and the ceiling it has established at the end of the participants' academic trajectory that kept them within the limitations and parameters of the one-dimensional pathway. The findings in this section are significant for three reasons. First, the role of the State can be found at the core of the other findings in this study that will be discussed in the subsequent three sections of this chapter. Second, in answering my research question, the role of the State is a key (f)actor in how Sharif graduates' professional aspirations have been shaped. Third, the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a rigid State whose control impacted the lives of these young men presents a unique finding not discussed in depth in the wider literature and therefore is a significant contribution to the discussions on aspiration, employability, and the human capital argument that has largely held a universal approach without deeply examining authoritarian regimes. Thus, in section

two I discuss the effects of the State's one-dimensional pathway in shaping the participants' professional aspirations and the subsequent tensions that resulted. Then I explain how these findings highlight the shortcomings in the literature on aspiration as it relates to the Iranian context and in answering my research question. Then in sections three and four I expound on how this study's findings also revealed limitations in our understanding of employability and the human capital argument when seen within an authoritarian context.

8.1 The role of the State and the State's ceiling

This study put forth evidence and perceptions of an Iranian context where the schools, university, job market, and society that the participants navigated were subordinate to, influenced, operated, and/or controlled by an authoritarian and oligarchical State and its tentacles of influence vis-à-vis the *khodi* and *khusulati*. The control of the State, and the dominant role of the *khodi*, impacted the lived experiences of the participants as they navigated the school system, higher education system, and job market in their attempts to explore, identify, and achieve their professional aspirations inside Iran. The State had established a status quo within Iran based on religious and ideological beliefs that enabled them to control the country's school system, higher education system, job market – as well as the banking sector, trade routes, media outlets, and tech industry. Moreover, the *khodi* operated as the State's resistance to change while profiting and benefiting from the country's status quo or socially accepted norms that included the continuous push for the one-dimensional pathway of the *ghayre-khodi* in order to keep them from amassing enough wealth, influence, or following to possibly challenge the status quo. Thus, the *khodi* had its influence in the mafia who operated the *konkur*, the mafia within Sharif, the *khusulati* companies that monopolized vast sections of Iran's job market, and governmental and government-linked entities, who advised and often forced the participants to remain on the one-dimensional path.

As a result, the role of the State within this context appears to be one of self-preservation and preemptive calculations in thwarting existential threats to its power and control. For example, if children within Iran were raised believing they could be and do whatever they wanted, as long as they worked hard and obeyed the law, many could possibly grow up with aspirations that could be potential threats to the State's status quo. Moreover, cultivating generations to think in such a way also increases the likelihood of likeminded individuals mobilizing in opposition to the State. The lived experiences of my participants highlight these tensions between the *khodi* and *ghayre-khodi*. Therefore, in answering the research question of how my participants' professional aspirations were shaped by their pre-university, within-university, and post-graduation experiences, the role of the State plays a significant part as a key actor and factor in the participants' aspirations being shaped within parameters of the one-dimensional pathway. One aspect of this limitation is the ceiling at the end of the pathway that kept the participants within the State-created/enabled and *khodi*-enforced parameters. Even after the participants discovered these limitations, searched for ways to overcome or bypass them, and worked on improving their own shortcomings and weaknesses, they were unable to ascend the professional ladder beyond the ceiling that was set for them because they were a *ghayre-khodi.*

Thus, the foundational contribution of this study challenges Western scholars' assumptions of the level of fluidity of a State, and the diffused understandings of a State, that allow or provide space for professional growth, societal progress, and institutional change. The failure to thoroughly investigate, or take into consideration, the role of a rigid State, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, has led to universal and categorical explanations whereby Western understandings of professional aspirations, graduate employability, and job market returns are applied to an Iranian context when it is not germane. As a result, this study's investigation into the role of the State reveals significant contributions to how we think about professional

aspirations, graduate employability, and job market returns. Let us elaborate the three ways we can think about this problem in the following three sections.

8.2 The effects of the State's one-dimensional pathway and subsequent tensions

The State's one-dimensional pathway shaped the participants' professional aspirations in three ways. First, the pathway blurred the participants' ability to differentiate between aspirations that were their own versus the expectations from school, university, society, and the people in their lives. This blurring of aspirational awareness adversely effected the participants throughout the formative and younger years of their lives during which time they could have experimented, failed, and tried a myriad of endeavors in the hopes of exploring their likes, dislikes, and aspirational goals. Rather, the participants increasingly experienced the push to remain one-dimensional, short-sighted, and oblivious to the ideas of their future selves. The manifestation of this push was a highly-centralized educational system and a society that reinforced the one-dimensional path that superficially appeared to be championing the human capital argument of investing in education – I will discuss later in the chapter how the human capital promise was a broken and empty promise for the participants of this study.

Moreover, if the participants found ways to challenge this one-dimensional push, they still felt overpowered with the added pressures and expectations from certain tentacles of the State. These tentacles would include governmental entities, State-ran media outlets, as well as the *khodi*'s influence throughout the participants' lives. Thus, the participants' continued attempts to envisage and explore alternative ideas of their aspirations were worn away. What resided in the absence of the participants' individual aspirational awareness was an internalized manifestation of the one-dimensional pathway. As a result, a tension formed between the participants and the institutions and people pushing them on this pathway, further complicating the participants' journey towards trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran.

The second way the one-dimensional pathway shaped the participants' professional aspirations was the tense relationship the participants had with the *khodi*. As the participants unclouded the blurred distinction between their own aspirations and the State expectations, they no longer simply questioned the purpose of the one-dimensional push but defied it. As a result, if the *khodi*'s indirect involvement in keeping the participants on the one-dimensional pathway was insufficient they became directly involved in preventing the participants' attempts in trying to accomplish a professional aspiration that conflicted with the established status quo and deviated from the pathway.

Thus, the continued struggles and tension the participants felt throughout their young lives increasingly became more tactile as they drew closer to and navigated Iran's job market. With each tentacle of the State preventing the participants' pursuits of trying to realize their own professional aspirations inside Iran further pushed the participants back closer to the one-dimensional pathway. Despite the participants' continued professional maturation, employability enhancements, and navigational maneuvering within the parameters of society and the job market, they concluded that there was a limit to the extent to which they felt they could realize their own aspirations inside Iran.

The third way the one-dimensional pathway shaped the participants' professional aspirations was through circumstantial conditions. In other words, either the participants accepted their circumstances within the parameters set by the *khodi* and the State; or the participants chose to pursue their own professional aspirations outside of Iran. With either condition a one-dimensional pathway was selected by the participants that were perceived to be acceptable by the *khodi,* and the State. However, neither option was the participants' preferred option. While there may be variations of the one-dimensional pathway dependent on an individual's educational attainment – i.e. obtaining a high school diploma versus an elite university degree

– the one-dimensional path is distinguishable by the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* divide through ideological affiliations and status networks.

According to the findings, the one-dimensional pathway for a *ghayre-khodi* eventually concludes with the circumstantial conditions of either acquiescing with the status quo and getting a job within the accepted parameters, or leaving the country. And according to the participants, the inevitable moment in which a *ghayre-khodi* individual reaches this ceiling is only a matter of time. In the case of Cyrus, for example, he completed his bachelors, tried and failed with two startups, completed his masters, tried and failed with two more startups, then worked on bypassing his *sarbazi,* and got a job. While the experiences and the duration may be different for each *ghayre-khodi* individual, the end result is the same according to the participants. After all the attempts by the participants to deviate from the one-dimensional pathway, they eventually were steered back on the pathway. This is the defining difference between a *khodi* versus a *ghayre-khodi*'s pathway.

The argument can be made that a *khodi*-graduate also has to follow a one-dimensional pathway because of his relational proximity to the State. However, the pathway for a *khodi* includes off-ramps and on-ramps that provide the individual certain concessions, advantages, leniencies, and privileges. For example, they could be allowed to attend the university they want and major in the subject they want regardless of their *konkur* score or even without taking the *konkur* exam. They could obtain their passport and travel outside Iran without having to complete their *sarbazi,* or they do not even have to enlist in the *sarbazi*. They also have more options in regards to their profession because they are a part of the system and not a threat to the status quo. For example, the startups the participants were prevented or denied from pursuing were later established by a *khodi* or *khusulati*. The ceiling at the end of a *ghayre-khodi*'s one-dimensional pathway ensures that they remain within a certain socioeconomic demographic that is non-threatening to the State's sphere of influence and control.

Thus, the second contribution of this study to the literature on aspiration is the argument that aspirational attainment is perhaps more dependent on what a graduate is allowed to aspire for; and then if they will be allowed to attain it. To think about this differently, let us consider the following: if a State's primary concerns are (a) holding on to power because their legitimacy is under question; (b) procuring and controlling major revenue streams to help them stay in power and circumvent economic sanctions; and (c) superimposing ideological, social, political, and religious norms in order to influence its citizens' thought processes and behavior to counteract threats to (a) and (b), then individuals considered outsiders, or *ghayre-khodi*, will not be allowed to attain aspirations the State deems threatening to (a) and (b).

When discussing this authoritarian context within the broader literature on aspiration we see an absence in debating how State control impacts a graduate's exploration, identification, and pursuit of professional aspirations. As a result, notions of goal-setting theory (Forster & Souvignier, 2014; Locke & Latham, 2006; Schunk, 2001), or social cognitive career theory (Ingram, 2017; Lent et al., 1994; Locke & Latham, 1990; Sawitri et al., 2014), for example, are limited in explaining professional aspirations within the Iranian context due to role of the State. Moreover, personal initiative (Fay & Frese, 2001), or extracurricular activities – such as sports, music, social and academic clubs, volunteering – (Larson et al., 2006; Seow & Pan, 2014), or achievement motivation (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016; Lens et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000), for example, all come up short when considering the one-dimensional push by a rigid State and its tentacles of influence.

The findings have shown that while my five participants tried different Western-focused strategies to attain their aspirations inside Iran, the role of the State was not adequately accounted for. The ceiling the participants hit and the resistance they perceived from the State's tentacles of influence prevented the fruition of these theories and measures of aspiration. The limitation in these Western approaches is also seen in the works of Pettit (2017) in Egypt and

Mains (2012) in Ethiopia. Pettit and Mains' participants' repeated attempts of setting goals and staying motivated constantly led to subsequent failure. Despite the Egyptian and Ethiopian governments having more similarities with the Islamic Republic of Iran then with Western States, their participants continued to persevere due to the role of the State in their respected countries being relatively more fluid and responsive to change.

That is why Tomlinson's (2008, p. 59) argument on the limitations in the capital theories/framework was applicable to this study because my participants did "understand their future job market outcomes as being more complex than simply possessing extra credentials and technical knowledge from higher education". They also later realized that the complex nature in their future job market outcomes involved the State and its tentacles of influence. As a result of this complexity brought upon by a rigid authoritarian State, we may have to rethink how we discuss professional aspirations. For example, an added fifth variation to Spenner and Featherman's (1978) four variations of aspiration may be necessary in order to incorporate the role of the State and better understand the authoritarian context of one's aspirational pathway. Or we may need to rethink Appadurai's (2013) capacity to aspire beyond just nodes and pathways for those less or more fortunate but rather those who are less or more connected to the State. Perhaps ideological nodes and pathways are a necessary addition to understand how a *khodi* versus a *ghayre-khodi* have the capacity to aspire for academic and professional goals.

As a result, questions can be raised as to how effective one's employability and human capital investments are when the State is deciding who is allowed to aspire for what and if the individual will be allowed to attain that aspiration inside their own country.

8.3 Limitations to employability in an Iranian context

Thus, what we did not know about employability in Iran is the extent to which employability seems contingent upon, and often times at the mercy of, the State; specifically, the State's

tentacles of influence in deciding how much to suppress the *ghayre-khodi*'s professional aspirational attainment inside Iran. The global debates do not deeply examine an individual's employability within an authoritarian regime such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. While the participants increasingly strengthened and exercised their employability, they perceived a reciprocal counterbalance by the *khodi* in the restrictions they experienced. One the one hand, as the participants matured they were discovering the full potential of their agency. They analyzed aspects of their lives that they believed required alteration in order for them to try to increase their possibilities of realizing their own professional aspirations inside Iran. For example, the participants became multi-dimensional, changed their environment, pursued extracurricular activities, strengthened their mental health, became self-critical and self-reliant, and enhanced their employability.

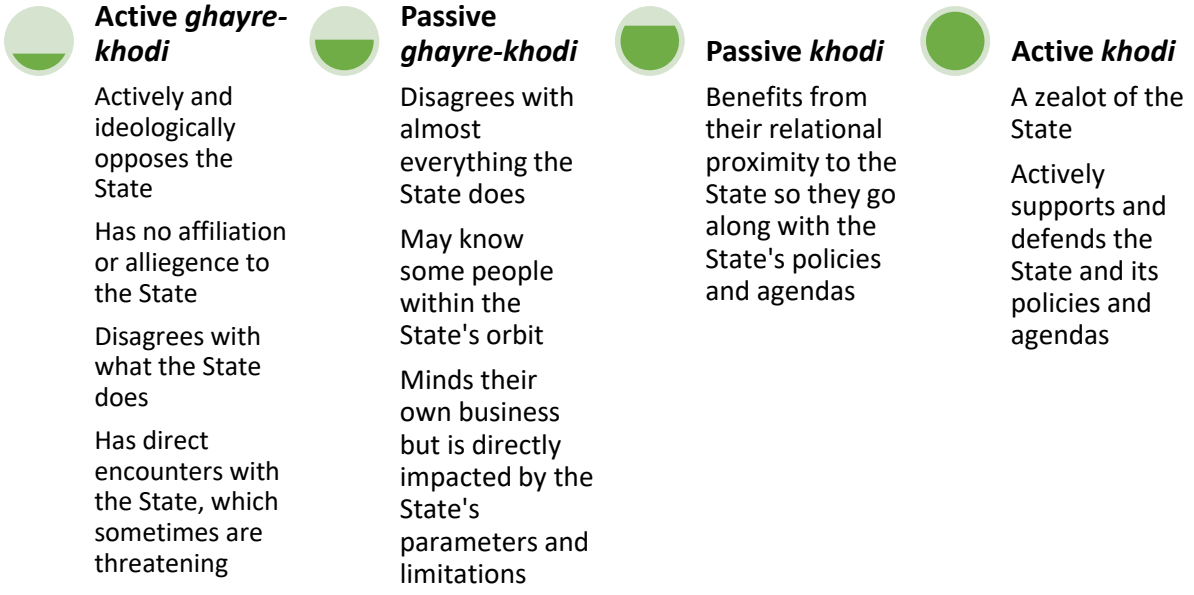
On the other hand, the State's heightened counterbalance to the participants' agentic maturation and improved employability led the participants to feel that their efforts were not being reflected in the trajectory of the path they were on. Rather, the participants felt that the extent to which they were able to exert their employability was limited within State parameters, which often positioned the participants at odds with the very institutions they were told to pursue and believe would lead to a guaranteed and successful life. The participants were repeatedly told to fulfill the one-dimensional aspiration and were reassured that if they did, their future would be guaranteed to be a success. As a result, there was a mismatch between the lived reality for the participants and the post-graduation expectations they had as a result of their adolescent obedience to the one-dimensional pathway. This mismatch ties to the aforementioned blurring of aspirational awareness. The continued assurance the participants heard signified a reframing of the human capital argument in order to keep the participants on the one-dimensional path but without the outcomes that the human capital theory discusses.

Similar to Brown et al. (2011) criticizing human capital theory and its broken promises in a globalized economy where over qualified graduates compete for low waged jobs in a race to the bottom of a middle class life, on a domestic scale and within an Iranian context, these broken promises also existed for the participants but with the added complexities of a State's rigid control that further broke the promises of one's return on investment. Thus, by employing Tomlinson's (2007, 2008, 2012) subjective notion of employability this study was able to uncover external factors, personal circumstances, and individual factors that McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argued as paramount in discussing employability, precisely for the reasons revealed in this study.

Thus, the third contribution of this study to the literature on employability is the argument that an aspect of enhancing one's employability is dependent on one's affiliation or allegiance to the State. This study has brought forth the argument that employability within an authoritarian context may have less to do with skills and attributes that are attractive to employers; or economic and job market intangibles that will increase one's chances of gainful employment. But rather, employability within an authoritarian context, such as Iran, has more to do with where one resides on the ideological scale of being considered a *ghayre-khodi* or a *khodi*. To think about this differently, let us consider the following in Table 4:

Table 4

Ideological-employability scale within Iran's authoritarian context



This non-exhaustive ideological-employability scale briefly highlights the range in which citizens of Iran can be categorized based on their ideological and status network in relation to the State and the *khodi*. Based on where the individual resides on this scale we can determine the extent of their ideological employability that must be factored in along with the global debates on employability if we are to determine how effective a graduates employability is within an authoritarian context such as Iran. Given the findings from this study, the participants would be categorized as passive *ghayre-khodi*.

Therefore, the dominant discourse on employability may require a broader discussion other than the argument of investing in oneself – by means of education, training, and other pertinent activities – can an individual realize their aspirations. The existing literature that places the onus on the individual (Baruch, 2001; Garavan, 1999) to either (a) "move self-sufficiently" within the job market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 2), (b) find ways to enhance their attractiveness within that job market (Iles et al., 1996), (c) "anticipate changes in tasks and work environment and react to these changes in a proactive way" (Sanders & de Grip, 2004, p. 76), and/or (d) exercise an "active adaptability that enables them to identify and realize job

opportunities" (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 16), must be reevaluated to consider the conditions set by an authoritarian State.

The Western argument that if an individual's environment and conditions are not conducive, he/she will find a way to realize their aspiration; and if they do not, then there is something wrong with their approach and they must restrategize, does not take us far enough within an Iranian context. These Western debates' continued focus on the individual, maintaining that one's employability derives from the different capitals one can invest in, such as human, cultural, personal, reputational, and/or social (Tholen, 2017) fail to consider the added ideological element to enhancing one's employability that this study puts forth. These debates are accurate in explaining my participants' lived experiences if this study examined their migration abroad, but when focusing on the participants' lived experiences inside Iran and faced with an authoritarian regime, these arguments come up short and an ideological scale, like Table 4, must also be considered.

8.4 Limitations to human capital theory in an authoritarian context

Moreover, the role of the State within the Iranian context highlights the limitations of the human capital theory as well as challenges the Western-centered view that graduate employability can lead to job market returns with professional aspirations being realized if the individual relies on and invests in themselves. Although the human capital theory does not capture the social aspect of the job market, the linear argument of education leading to job market success is an argument made by Iran's school system, high education system, society, and State. However, the State's propagation of this linear path seemingly appears to be a façade or an illusion – by way of the one-dimensional pathway – that masks the existential fears of the *khodi* in their attempts to reduce university graduates to a one-dimensional aspiration. This goes beyond just education and follows the youth deep into his post-graduation life of finding a career, becoming independent, starting a family, and sustaining a standard of living conducive

to such endeavors; thereby curbing his successes so the individual remains within certain parameters to ensure limited financial, social, and influential growth; then, as a result, remaining below a State-established ceiling that the *khodi* does not want the *ghayre-khodi* to go beyond because that would be a threat to the *khodi*'s power and influence. In other words, this one-dimensional push is couched within a human capital argument that eventually results in the realization of broken and empty promises. At which time, it seemingly feels too late for the individual to remedy the newly discovered broken promises.

According to participant narratives, no amount of restrategizing by enhancing their agency, capitals, and employability led them to remedy their situation inside Iran in order to realize their own professional aspirations inside the country. If the arguments of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993) are examined further within the Iranian context that the participants perceived, then perhaps the human capital argument is applicable for the four participants who left Iran in pursuit of realizing their aspirations. However, the issue of the participants' inability to realize their aspirations inside Iran still raises two problems with human capital investments. One problem encapsulates the many issues graduates throughout the world experience in the job market; for instance, economic insufficiencies, like in Italy (Pozzoli, 2009); or a job-skills mismatch, like in Greece (Liagouras et al., 2003); or a disconnect between high education and the job market, like in Tanzania (Al-Dosary, 2006); or the positional conflict within a globalized job market (Brown et al., 2011). Although Iran is no exception to these issues, it is the second problem where the Iranian context problematizes the limitations of the human capital argument: the role of the State in an adversarial capacity.

For starters, Becker's (1993, p. 17) approach to countries like Iran is one of universal application where he concentrates on showing "how the analysis of investments in human capital helps in understanding a large and varied class of behavior even in developing countries and countries with very different cultures". This assertion may be accurate in analyzing some

developing or different-cultured countries like India (Jeffrey, 2010), Ethiopia (Mains, 2012), Egypt (Pettit, 2017), and Nairobi (Thieme, 2017), but not Iran. These studies, which are similar to my own, discovered that their participants were able to either realize their professional aspirations, or manifest their agency and employability in order to draw closer to realizing their aspirations inside their country, with the help of investments in human capital. However, as this study has shown, Iran is a unique case in regards to the role of State, its tentacles of influence, and thus the limits to human capital investment returns.

Moreover, Becker's (1993, p. 17) discussion also follows modern economics and assumes that "these investments usually are rational responses to a calculus of expected costs and benefits". However, this assumption of a rational response of expected costs and benefits fails to consider Iran's complexities of (a) geo-political tensions with the world's hegemonic power (the United States), (b) decades of international sanctions, and (c) a religious battle with Saudi Arabia, to where the Islamic Republic of Iran has wielded an ideological and status network through the *khodi* to ensure its stranglehold over its country. The role of a fluid State is critical in supporting the human capital theory, which often may find compelling arguments in an authoritarian country like Egypt or a developing country like Ethiopia. However, a different argument has emerged from this study.

The participants' account of the State and the *khodi* not being as fluid and open to change raises the second limitation with the human capital argument. This is the assumption that the individual who is navigating the multitudes of their country's education system, job market, and society in pursuit of realizing their own professional aspirations is doing so within a system where the country's governing body is fluid and open to change. This study has shown that as long as the participants stayed in Iran they had a deterministic perception of the State's unwillingness to change if the impulse of that change came from the *ghayre-khodi*.

Therefore, the participants felt they were on their own to strengthen their human capital, realize their professional aspirations, achieve a standard of living conducive to an independent life with a family. Thus, the third limitation in the human capital argument is the continued focus that the individual who must work on himself to acquire the needed skills, attributes, and knowledge to see returns on their investments in the job market. Schultz (1961), for example, argues that investment in education leads to the socio-economic development of one's society, and the increased well-being of the citizenry. Becker (1993) adds that individuals decide on their education and training by analyzing the pros and cons. Thus, there is a promise or guarantee that if one were to follow this path they will succeed. This individual-focus is problematic if (a) the role of the State is one of an adversarial capacity, (b) with a ceiling that blocks an individual's professional, socio-economic, and civic growth, and (c) the *khodi* that enforces limitations. As much as the participants invested in themselves the return on those investments did not bear fruit inside Iran, contrary to Schultz's argument. The guaranteed and successful life they were continuously promised was eventually revealed to them as a broken or empty promise due to the limited parameters within which they were allowed to navigate.

Thus the fourth, final, and most significant contribution of this study is, in addition to human capital, an observation of ideological capital also needs to be considered when examining an individual's experience through their country's education system and job market. Similar to how we investigate an individual's efforts in strengthening all forms of capital – whether it is human, social, cultural, religious, or financial – we must also investigate their efforts in strengthening their ideological capital. This investigation into an individual's ideological capital fills in the details of the ideological-employability scale above in regards to how, where, why, and if an individual chooses to invest in the ideology of the State in order to increase their chances of successfully navigating the job market, realizing their professional aspirations inside their country, and securing gainful employment. If my participants' investment in

ideological capital was stronger, and closer to the *khodi*, perhaps their job market experiences and their ability to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran would have had a more fruitful return.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that if an authoritarian and oligarchical State, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, can reframe promises of human capital theory and employability to reduce its graduates to a one-dimensional aspiration irrespective of how much the individual invests in human capital and improves their employability, then a different way of thinking involving ideological elements – like ideological nodes and pathways, an ideological-employability scale, and ideological capital – may be necessary in understanding the relationship between higher education and the job market, a graduates' transition into the job market, the effectiveness of one's employability, and the relationship between employment and professional aspirations.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

The participants described how their pre-university time felt like the educational institutions were obstructing their exploration of their own individual aspirations by pushing them down a short-sighted one-dimensional path. There emerged a set of aspirations from the barriers the participants experienced whereby a pathway was set for them to focus on studying, earning top grades, passing standardized tests, attending schools for the gifted, ranking high on the *konkur*, enrolling in top-tier universities, and graduating with a STEMM degree. This pathway felt prioritized over other aspects of the participants' lives. For instance, extracurricular activities, social life, athletics, hobbies, art and music were pushed aside. Moreover, strategizing for their long-term future – i.e., beyond high school, within-university, and post-graduation – were viewed as unimportant. Instead, the participants were repeatedly told to fulfill these one-dimensional goals and were reassured that if they did, their future would be guaranteed to be a success.

Therefore, the participants initially ignored their interests and aspirations because they did not know they could contemplate other visions of themselves or other versions of their life. As they matured through their pre-university time, the participants questioned this one-dimensional aspiration and where this path would take them. If they found ways to challenge their educational institutions, they still felt overpowered with the added pressures from society and the adults in their lives to continue with this accepted norm. Moreover, the participants distantly experienced elements of the State that ostensibly enabled such barriers and pathways to exist due to the highly-centralized structure of Iran's educational institutions – i.e., the school system, higher education system, the *konkur* system, Science Olympiad, and the gifted school exam.

As a result, a tension between the participants and the educational institutions began to form towards the end of their pre-university time. The participants' attempts to envisage and explore alternative ideas of their aspirations were worn away by the adults in their lives. What resided in the absence of the participants' aspirational agency was an internalized manifestation of the one-dimensional pathway – thus blurring their ability to differentiate between aspirations that were their own versus State expectations. As the participants continued on this pathway into Sharif, they remained uncertain and confused about their future, while convinced that life would not begin until they fulfilled these one-dimensional goals.

The participants' continued maturation during their within-university time gradually led them to two realizations. On the one hand, they were discovering the full potential of their agency and employability. What this meant for the participants was a feeling of a stronger disposition in challenging their educational institutions in trying to break from the one-dimensional pathway, while analyzing aspects of their lives that they believed required alteration in order for them to try to increase their possibilities of realizing their own aspirations inside Iran. For example, the participants became multi-dimensional, changed their environment, pursued extracurricular activities, strengthened their mental health, became self-critical and self-reliant, and enhanced their employability.

On the other hand, the participants were experiencing the barriers from the State, through the *khodi*, in a more direct manner. What this meant for the participants was an uncompromising educational system that reinforced the one-dimensional aspirations from pre-university. This heighten counterbalance to the participants' aforementioned agentic maturation led to a tense and complex relationship, vis-à-vis the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* dynamic, whereby the participants felt their efforts were not being reflected in the trajectory of the path they were on. Rather, the participants felt that the extent to which they were able to exert their agency and employability was limited within State parameters, which often positioned the participants at

odds with the very institutions – i.e., Sharif University – they were told to pursue and believe would lead to a guaranteed and successful life.

Thus, while on the precipice of entering the workforce, the participants' continued uncertainty about their future was compounded by their struggles to distance themselves from the one-dimensional pathway while simultaneously searching for ways to maximize their employability inside the limited parameters of Iran's accepted norms to identify and realize their aspirations. The continued struggles and tension the participants felt became more tactile during the participants' post-graduation. Specifically with the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* dynamic where the participants reported direct involvement by governmental entities and personnel attempting to prevent the participants' pursuits of trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran. Moreover, the *khodi* were perceived as more active in perpetuating the one-dimensional pathway while opposing alternative options and efforts for change. Despite the participants' continued professional maturation, employability enhancements, and navigational maneuvering within the State and *khodi* parameters, they concluded that there was a ceiling that capped the extent to which they felt they could realize their own professional aspirations inside Iran.

As a result, the participants believed they were left with three career decisions. First, lower or disregard their own aspirations and continue to follow the one-dimensional pathway. This option was undesirable for the participants because they were already on this path and discovering its limitations. In other words, their complete understanding of the guaranteed and successful life via the one-dimensional aspiration – that was formed during the participants' pre-university and reinforced within-university – was not fully revealed to them until their post-graduation time, at which point the participants discovered the broken or empty promises that led them to limited career options. Their second career decision would be to enter a profession where financial prosperity was achievable, but their own professional aspirations were not.

This option was also undesirable because the participants were not interested in simply a monetary achievement but also wanted to raise the standard of living in Iran and improve society. Their third choice would be to leave Iran for a country where the State is more fluid and provides more space for the participants to pursue and realize their own aspirations. This third option – which the participants initially did not want to choose – eventually seemed the most viable. The participants who left (Ismail and Darius) or decided to leave (Karim and Nader) did so because of the feeling of a push to leave their country, rather than a pull from a foreign nation. The participant who stayed in Iran (Cyrus) eventually acquiesced to the norms of the country, and thus, the one-dimensional pathway.

The key dimension of the State's perceived dominance that brings into question the human capital argument was the resistance to change from its tentacles of influence who have been profiting and benefiting from the country's status quo or socially accepted norms that included the continuous push for the one-dimensional pathway for the *ghayre-khodi*. These specifically encompass such entities like those who operate the *konkur*, or the mafia within Sharif, or the *khusulati* companies that have monopolized vast sections of the job market, or governmental and government-linked entities who advised and often forced the youth to follow this one-dimensional path. These perceived active engagements, and the participants' subsequent tensions with the State's tentacles were the most contentious when the participants discovered the broken or empty promises of the one-dimensional aspiration; tried to explore, identify, and achieve their own aspirations; and tried to enact their agency beyond what was permitted by the *khodi* and State.

9.1 Suggestions for future research

One suggestion for future research is studying a larger number of graduates. There has been a robust debate inside Iran, on a national scale, regarding the issues discussed in this study, which suggests that the experiences of my five participants may not be unique to only them and

therefore broader research on this study could uncover a deeper understanding into the lived experiences of graduates in Iran, vis-à-vis, aspirational attainment, employability, and job market expectations. Due to the novelty of the study a qualitative or quantitative approach could be implemented to further this research. In addition to a larger sample size, random sampling could be employed in selecting participants. Also, a questionnaire could be developed based off the findings from this study. Specifically, future researchers could incorporate this study's criticism of human capital theory and its Western centered context of graduate employment into their interviews or questionnaires. Or, future researchers may choose a different approach, like a qualitative or quantitative comparison between *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* graduates and how they navigate Iran's higher education system and job market in trying to realize their professional aspirations.

The decision by future researcher to focus on a small or large sample size may depend on a few factors beyond their control. For example, if there is a time constraint on conducting research; or, if proper security and safety measures cannot be ensured during the fieldwork inside Iran. Nevertheless, this study has shown that five participants is an acceptable representation according to the literature (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). However, having too few participants weakens the researcher's ability to examine variations, patterns, and recurrences which supports a more thorough cross-case analysis and leads to a relatively more robust study (Stake, 1995). On the other hand, if there are no time constraints and the researcher feels safe conducting research inside Iran, then a larger sample size would greatly advance the work I have begun here. Having too many participants can cause a decline in the quality and quantity of information gathered, as well as the depth in each participant being studied (Creswell, 2007). However, if the proper precautions are taken to ensure such shortcomings do not arise, future researcher can potentially uncover much more about Iran's school system, higher education system, job market, and State/*khodi* influence.

In addition to sample size, methodology, and sampling method, there are also a number of criteria that can be investigated to not only determine the trustworthiness and credibility of my work but also to make new discoveries. Some of the criteria are: researching a different university, perhaps more than one and not necessarily within Tehran, and also universities that are not considered elite. For example, there are universities exclusive to the *khodi*. It is difficult to gain access to such an institution, especially for a *ghayre-khodi*. However, conducting research on these graduates may uncover a different kind of one-dimensional pathway (or none at all) being forced on graduates. The researcher may run the risk of jeopardizing their safety in trying to research such an institution. However, I believe the researcher could overcome these limitations if they follow the same precautions I did.

For starters, if their travel documents, religious affiliation, and outward appearance coincided with the socially acceptable norms of the country. During my field work there were two instances that created setbacks. First, for one week in November 2019 there were protests, riots, and a partial internet blackout. The second instance occurred in January 2020 when the U.S.-Iran conflict increased with talks of war. Thus, with political tension flaring up domestically and internationally, a sophisticated level of discretion was necessary to successfully and safely conduct my research which limited the scope to which I could conduct interviews, explore institutions, and further research sensitive issues like the *khodi* versus *ghayre-khodi* tension.

Precautions should also be taken regarding who you speak to and how much information you divulge to each individual about yourself and your research. I would strongly advise against any kind of formal or official announcement of your presence and purpose inside Iran to any entity. Maintaining a person-to-person connection increases your odds in controlling how much information each person has about you and the reason why you are in Iran. This level of discretion is vital in keeping you below the State's, the government's, and the *khodi*'s radar so to not draw more attention to yourself then needed – which in turn, decreases the likelihood of

jeopardizing your safety, your participants, and/or your research. One pivotal way, I believe, you can remain below the radar is by appearing to be one of the *khodi*. In other words, appearing to be a pious, Iranian, practicing Shia-Muslim, who is at least sympathetic to the State (the Islamic Republic).

Further challenges of conducting research in Iran is limiting your time in public spaces in order to increase your safety and decrease the chances of encountering a questionable situation that could potentially put you at risk. For example, I was born in Iran and raised in America, so even though I am categorized as a pious, Iranian, practicing Shia-Muslim, my sympathies towards the State have its limits. Moreover, I have a Western accent when speaking Persian which could be problematic depending on who I interact with. Therefore, I spent the majority of my time at my apartment or at my office and avoided social situations as a precautionary measure. Of course, there are exceptions and alternative ways to view and manage such concerns. For example, places like Tehran are comparatively less conservative or socially/culturally strict as other parts of Iran. Nevertheless, it is better to be cautious.

However, there are many different types and numbers of universities and graduates one can study with much fewer risks. Also, researching majors other than engineering can uncover new findings. For instance, other STEMM or non-STEMM majors, particularly the arts, humanities, and social sciences to see what kind of barriers these graduates encounter since non-STEMM fields have historically been negatively stigmatized. For example, the University of Tehran is considered an elite university and is reputable for its non-STEMM majors. A qualitative or quantitative investigation on how professional aspirations were shaped for these graduates would also be fascinating. Moreover, researching a university within a rural area, for example – a stark contrast from a major city and the capital of the country – would also uncover further socio-economic issues, as well as aspirational and agentic findings different from city or elite graduates.

In addition to future researchers studying a larger number of graduates, different characteristics about the participants could also uncover new findings. For example, the participants' gender, ethnicity, and/or their *khodi* affiliation. If the researcher is able to ensure their safety, as I mentioned above, in order to conduct a thorough and longitudinal study, for example, then a larger sampling of graduates would greatly benefit future research. If male graduates could be found who place a higher importance on masculinity and honor, then we could see if an internal tension exists between the graduates' expectations of starting a, and providing for, their family regardless of what their job is versus an uncompromising disposition to refuse certain jobs they deem low status or unethical.

Also, if future researchers are female they could potentially have an easier attempt in researching female graduates due to the difficulties I mentioned in the Methodology chapter and uncover gender-related issues that this research did not investigate. Conducting qualitative fieldwork similar to this study with female graduates could reveal a multitude of problems from cultural pressures to wed and bear children at a young age, to religious limitations in professional aspirations, and pressures to conform to societal norms – like the mandatory hijab and the 2022 protests against such a law after the murder of Mahsa Amini.

Additionally, with the influx of Afghanis legally and illegally entering Iran after the 2021 United States military withdrawal and the subsequent ascension of the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, focusing on a specific ethnicity could also uncover race-related issues in how professional aspirations have been shaped for these graduates, as well as the tension with the institutions and people in their lives, including the State, *khodi*, and *khusulati*.

Furthermore, a longitudinal qualitative study into the lives of participants could explore more personal revelations. Such as, what the individual could have done when they were younger in order to circumvent the perceived one-dimensional aspiration. Perhaps interviewing

individuals in their forties or fifties could reveal a more reflective individual who has had time to look back and analyze their lives, and therefore come up with insightful thoughts on their upbringing. The participants did blame themselves, to an extent, for their unrealized professional aspirations inside Iran – however, perhaps after decades of contemplation they might have a different perspective. The participants did not see their honor or masculinity as impediments to their inability in trying to realize their professional aspirations inside Iran because these two attributes appeared to be of little concern to them when compared to the uncertainties and tensions they experienced. However, I am curious how such beliefs would exist if the participants were older and had more experience in Iran's job market. Also, considering most of my participants have left or planned to leave Iran, future research could include a mixed-method approach – with a questionnaire followed up with an in-depth interview for example – in examining the mobility, internationalization, and return home of graduates who had unrealized professional aspirations inside Iran. Also, a psychological approach could uncover more of the thought processes of Iran's youth in determining their level of hopelessness, fatalistic outlooks, deterministic views, and assigning responsibility and blame. Considering this study is the first of its kind, the possibilities for further research are seemingly endless.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, perhaps an altered variation of Althusser's (2006, 2014) ideological state apparatuses could be explored further in future research to help theorize and try to explain the complex nature of the State's ceiling, the *khodi*'s one-dimensional push, the *khusulati*'s monopolization of the job market, and the individual's navigation of such entities and barriers. Althusser argues that the State indoctrinates its citizens regarding aspirations, beliefs, and ideology, and the individual does not have his own aspirations and dreams because he is always behaving in a way that the State requires. For Althusser to make such a claim suggests the possibility that an individual can realize they have always behaved in a way that

the State required but then was able to break out of it. If that were not possible, and if Althusser's argument is correct, how else did Althusser develop such a theory if he himself did not break out of this inculcation to subsequently come up with this explanation? Therefore, perhaps a rethinking of Althusser's work within an Iranian context could shed light on the relationships between the individual, the State, and the State's apparatuses. And in so doing, this study's arguments of ideological nodes and pathways, an ideological-employability scale and ideological capital can also be further researched.

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Appendices

A. Update on participants as of October 2021

It has been twenty-one months (one year and nine months) to the week that I wrote this sentence since I last saw my five participants. December 2019 was my last meeting with each of them and that occurred three months before the spread of COVID-19. I did remain in periodic contact with each participant throughout the twenty-one months, as they helped audit my work and updated me on what has been going on in their life.

Karim continued working for the same *khusulati* company as a data analyst since he could not leave the country because of COVID-19. When he completed his MBA in the spring of 2021 he decided to take some personal time off from work to contemplate his future and possibly leaving Iran. He explained to me how he strengthened his abilities in skills like complex problem solving, being consistent in every aspect of his life, learning positive things and unlearning negative things. He was still upset that the school system, higher education system, and society "are focused on manufacturing or producing the same mentality in humans", which he believed stunted his mental, academic, and subsequent professional growth. Three years after graduating from Sharif, Karim had not made the professional progress he had hoped considering the time and effort he put into strengthening his employability, network, skills, and the like. He was still living with his parents, his pay was the same from when he started, he could not save up money, he could not afford his own place, and he had not married or started a family. Although Karim was still contemplating leaving Iran, he had the issue of his *sarbazi* to resolve or else he will be unable to obtain a passport.

In the summer of 2020 Nader left the company that hired him back in December 2019 in order to resolve his *sarbazi*. After completing his MBA in the spring of 2021 and further strengthening his skills in digital marketing, Nader found temporary contract work. Considering he had to spend two years in the *sarbazi*, these types of freelance work best fit his *sarbazi* schedule while also providing just enough income to manage his life. He was still searching for permanent positions in the consulting industry while also thinking of ways he could leave Iran in two years. He thought about pursuing a doctorate abroad but was not passionate enough about research. Nevertheless, he knew he wanted to leave because after four years since he graduated from Sharif, he did not progress in the areas of his life that he wanted.

He was still uncertain about his professional interest and unprepared to start a family of his own.

For Darius and Ismail – who were one plane ticket away from leaving Iran – COVID-19 had a severe impact on their plans as they spent the entire year of 2020 waiting for the opportunity to renew their student visas so they could leave. They each postponed their admissions to a doctorate program three times. The first student visa Ismail received in the beginning of 2020 was soon nullified due to COVID-19, and his two subsequent visa applications were rejected for the same reason. By the summer of 2021 he was in the process of trying to obtain his student visa for America. He added that his backup plan was to go to Turkey where he already received admissions for a master's program in computer science – and Iranian citizens can enter Turkey without a visa. Darius, for example, had to go to Pakistan to obtain his visa. Neither gentleman seriously pursued a career or job path, but instead focused on getting out of Iran and keeping all of their documents (legal, travel, academic, and the like) in order.

Cyrus was the most difficult to get a hold of and have answer my questions. The three times he did reply to my messages, his answers were the same: "things are exactly the same as when you left". In other words, he was working at the same company, still living with his parents, was not married yet, and had not saved enough money to live on his own. After four years since graduating from Sharif, Cyrus did not progress in the areas of his life that he wanted to. During my time with Cyrus I had no problems getting him to talk about his life and he told me that nothing was off limits. Twenty-one months later it seemed his attitude had changed based off his brief and scarce correspondence.

B. Detailed recruitment process

My contacts

Round 1 (May 2019)

This first round resulted in seventeen of my contacts being able to assist. One contact recommended searching LinkedIn because it had become a popular site for Iran's young adults, and *Sharifis* in particular, to network and advertise themselves for potential employment abroad. Thus, after a week, the search broadened to include LinkedIn as well – which will be discussed in the following section. Another contact from the exploratory study (a government official at the Ministry of Education) agreed to be interviewed as a stakeholder. One friend referred me to a Sharif alumni Facebook group, which consisted of over 1,900 members who primarily resided outside Iran. After multiple posts and follow ups and no reply, I stopped using Facebook. At that time, I speculated – and later discovered my assumption to be true – that Facebook was not as popular in Iran when compared to other social media platforms (like Instagram) and chat clients (like Telegram, an instant messaging app).

Round 2

Seventeen individuals were contacted in round two. The vast majority of them were Sharif professors, students, or graduates. One Sharif professor (MBA department) connected me to Sharif's student body president. One Sharif master's student was interested in participating; however, he had no experience in the job market or being unemployed, thus he was not a match for the study. Nevertheless, we continued to chat on WhatsApp and our conversation was very interesting. Of the *Sharifis* he knew, eighty percent left Iran and the other twenty continued their education inside Iran. At one point, he was puzzled by one of the questions, that if the job market were improved would they (and he) have continued their education. He never thought of it that way because he was always told to continue his education. This led me to investigate this point throughout the fieldwork.

I also met with the director of Sharif's industrial engineering department. Our conversation confirmed what the Sharif master's student explained about *Sharifis* either leaving Iran or continuing their education. He did not believe I could find participants who fit the criteria. Nevertheless, he offered to email my request to his department (faculty and students) – no one responded. I also met with one of the leading thinkers on Iran's higher education system. I was very hopeful that we could work together, and I could obtain pertinent documents and data,

and connect with potential participants. Unfortunately, we had a philosophical conversation that transitioned into a lecture.

Round 3

Eighteen individuals were contacted in round three. One Sharif graduate stressed the popularity of Telegram in Iran. He recommended I join four groups and follow seven channels that were related to the research. He added me to two of those groups: a support counseling group for Sharif graduates (1,928 members) and a Sharif group that discussed economic topics (903 members). I also met with a professor from Sharif's MBA department who introduced me to the Sharif alumni office. I briefly met with Sharif's undergraduate student body president. He was unable to help, and he was doubtful I would find participants. He echoed similar sentiments that *Sharifis* either leave Iran or continue their education. He did not believe their existed nor knew any *Sharifi* who experienced unemployment.

Despite this cautionary advice, that persisted throughout the fieldwork, I did persevere. Another individual I met with was a researcher at the Research Institute for Cultural and Social Studies. He admitted that, to the best of his knowledge, the research has yet to be performed on/in Iran. He also admitted that the majority of research in Iran was quantitative with a focus on student and graduate attitudes on higher education. He did share two qualitative books similar to my work which were from the female perspective.

Round 4 (June/July 2019)

After six weeks of working through my contacts' connections, finding a participant appeared unlikely. Nevertheless, I continued searching and contacted twenty-one individuals in round four. Again, there were two types of *Sharifis* I was encountering: those who continued their education and had no job market experience, or those who had left Iran. After many meetings and correspondence, I finally met a Sharif graduate (I will refer to him as Nader) who matched the criteria. We initially met to become better acquainted, ensure he fully understood the research, and confirmed he matchef the criteria. I did not expect him to agree to participate during our first meeting. I thought he would require additional time to think it over, however he was immediately interested in participating. At this point, Nader became the third participant because in the month that passed, two participants were confirmed through the LinkedIn search – which will be discussed in the following section.

I also met with the administration manager at Sharif's alumni office, along with two of her co-workers – one was their IT director and the other was a research fellow. Neither of them knew of anyone who fit the criteria and echoed my previous conversations that *Sharifis* either leave the country, continue their education, and/or find a job. They especially stressed the route of going abroad; despite their initial reaction, our first meeting was very promising. The administration manager invited me to give a speech on my research at an alumni event they were having in six months. Their IT director agreed to cooperate in finding data pertinent to the research. Moreover, their research fellow offered to find relevant documents for the research. At the conclusion of the meeting they offered to send an email to all their members (11,000) with my request.

Unfortunately, none of these offers materialized. Although their alumni event, in January, went as planned, I was unable to attend. I had to leave Iran earlier than scheduled due to the escalating conflict with America. Moreover, although we created a WhatsApp group to maintain correspondence, they either did not reply to my messages or did not follow through with our plans. Finally, the email they sent – if they sent it, because no proof was provided – returned no replies. Later on in the fieldwork, *Sharifis* mentioned how their alumni office was unhelpful or unreliable; primarily focusing on or catering to the alumni outside of Iran.

Round 5

Round five was more productive in locating stakeholders. Seventeen individuals were contacted, four of whom agreed to be interviewed: a Sharif professor from the aerospace engineering department; a Sharif guidance counselor; the co-founder of an employment website company; and the founder/president of a startup accelerator and employment website for *Sharifis*. I also met with two other employment website companies, however, they each had policies prohibiting them from granting interviews.

Round 6 (August 2019)

By round six, the connections through my contacts had reached an end after three months. Of the remaining ten individuals, one was found who fit the criteria (I will refer to him as Ismail). The same procedure was executed with Ismail as was with Nader. He too was very interested, and immediately agreed to participate.

LinkedIn

Round 1 (May 2019)

Of the sixty-four who were contacted, seven were interested in participating. Individual meetings were scheduled upon my arrival to Tehran. The first person I met with (I will refer to him as Karim) fit the criteria of the research and was eager to participate. Karim became the first participant, and at that time he was pursuing his MBA but preparing to drop out and apply for his masters abroad. There were two others with interesting stories that I thought would fit the criteria, however, after interviewing each of them discovered they had not experienced unemployment. One worked as a freelancer since he graduated with his masters in 2013 (which he pursued immediately after his bachelors) and was planning on leaving Iran. Although he had gaps of unemployment between his freelance work it was neither lengthy nor stressful for him to pursue other types of employment. He loved working as a freelancer because it provided him the flexibility in allocating his time towards preparing to leave Iran. The other individual graduated with his bachelors in 2019. I traveled to his hometown of six hours away from Tehran to interview him. He had a short-term temporary job and thought about starting a startup but then decided to complete his *sarbazi*.

Round 2

Twenty *Sharifis* were contacted in round two. Similar to my contacts' connections, most were either leaving Iran, continuing their education, or were employed. One of Karim's connections – a human resources manager – shared my inquiry in her WhatsApp group for graduates seeking career advice and opportunities. She introduced me to seven *Sharifis*. This connection proved to be vital because in round three I connected with the second participant. I also met with the director of the Iran Migration Observatory – a think tank under the auspices of the Sharif Policy Research Institute. By the conclusion of our meeting we agreed to work together; he also hired me as a research fellow and offered me an office which became the location where the majority of the interviews were conducted. There was also a Sharif master's student who posted my inquiry on his Instagram page – there were no responses.

Round 3 (June 2019)

Seventeen *Sharifis* were contacted in round three. Although most of them did not fit the criteria, there was one who did (I will refer to him as Cyrus) and became the second participant. We initially met to become better acquainted, however after listening to his story about the

education system, Sharif, and the job market – which was very fascinating and upsetting – it was evident his lived experiences matched the research. One stakeholder interviewee was also secured during this round.

Round 4

The results of round four (eleven individuals were contacted) led to further connections and securing two stakeholders. One in particular was an assistant manager at the Sharif Career School (at Sharif's Technology Services Complex). This was an important connection because Karim and Cyrus both attended the Sharif Career School on separate occasions. Perhaps more importantly, this was the first career services office at Sharif, thus, learning from their experiences was significant in addressing the research question. The other stakeholder was a Sharif professor (computer engineering department).

Round 5 (July 2019)

Round five was the end of the search (eighteen individuals were contacted). One stakeholder interviewee and the fifth participant were secured (I will refer to him as Darius). After meeting with Darius and learning about his struggles in the job market, it was evident he fit the research criteria. For example, he applied to two hundred jobs and received zero offers, then decided to pursue his MBA. The stakeholder was a director at Sharif's Technology Services Complex – the same place where the Career School was located. I discovered that Sharif's Technology Services Complex houses many offices, all dedicated to a particular aspect of assisting *Sharifis* prosper in the job market.

C. Description of stakeholders

Dr. Ali

I connected with Dr. Ali through a professional contact from America. A professor at Sharif University's Business School, Dr. Ali's expertise was in economics and management. He received his PhD in America. Considering Karim, Nader, and Darius were pursuing their MBA, it was important to interview a professor in this department to capture the other side of the story. As we conversed about *Sharifis* and their experiences in high education and the job market, Dr. Ali confirmed most of what the participants said from their first two interviews. He explained how the majority of MBA students had a bachelor's in engineering and that was due to its prestige. He went on to say that bachelor's degrees in business, management, or economics was not popular in Iran and the quality of teaching was low. He also added that the MBA programs in Iran – and in particular, in Sharif – were new, with most professors being Western educated. As a result, there was a trend in Iran that students believed their likelihood in acquiring a job was higher with an MBA. Dr. Ali strengthened this notion when he said almost all of the graduates from his department find jobs. However, he added a caveat doubting that the majority of them like their job and salary because the work was substandard, and the pay was inadequate to build an independent life. These last points were problems for each of the participants. Dr. Ali also attributed political and economic issues to why many graduates were unemployed. For example, the Iranian government was excessively involved in the job market. In most areas, meritocracy was replaced with ideology and politics.

Dr. Hassan

My introduction to Dr. Hassan was through a professional contact from America. He was a professor at Sharif University's Industrial Engineering Department. Considering Karim received his bachelors in this field, it was important to interview a professor from his department. Although much older than Dr. Ali, Dr. Hassan echoed most of Dr. Ali's assessment on graduate unemployment. The age difference is mentioned here because the participants explained that the older generation of professors from the 1979 revolution were either oblivious or apathetic about the struggles students experienced. Dr. Hassan, however, did not appear to be this way. He described how the majority of Iranians were pessimistic, negative, and hopeless about their standard of living and their future inside Iran. That, he argued, was why more than half of Sharif's graduates applied to go abroad. He went on to say that "Iran is a very unstable country due to politics, economy, and ideological issues. The youth cannot make plans because

these three entities dictate what kind of plans one can make". As we focused back on Sharif, Dr. Hassan explained how the university and his department did nothing to assist its students prepare for the job market. Again, these last points were problems that each of the participants explained. He also agreed with the participants that there was no connection between Sharif and the job market. Instead, Sharif was in an academic bubble striving to compete with the international community and was not concerned with the job market or real world.

Dr. Hossain

In the hopes of discovering a different, or counter, view on this issue of graduate unemployment, I interviewed another professor from the same department. Dr. Hassan introduced me to Dr. Hossain. Although Dr. Hossain did agree with the participants' criticisms of Sharif, the job market, and political and societal problems, he had one counter argument that placed the onus back on the graduate. He explained that he felt Sharif graduates had high expectations going into the job market. He described how the younger generations were not willing to work hard and incrementally excel in their profession – he called them lazy at one point. When I challenged him on this point and provided examples from the participants who worked hard and lowered their expectations, only to end up unemployed and/or underpaid, he admitted it was difficult to earn a high enough wage that could lead to a stable independent life but it was not impossible. One of his central points throughout our interview was stressing the importance of agency with each graduate. He admitted there were obstacles in Iran, however argued that obstacles existed in every country, and did not believe going abroad (he believed seventy percent of Sharif graduates go abroad) would increase one's chances of success (Dr. Hossain never left Iran, thus, his knowledge on this comparison was limited). He asserted that if they work hard, they could prosper.

Dr. Sajjad

According to *Sharifis* and professors, computer engineering was the most popular engineering department at Sharif because of its high employment rate for its graduates. As a result, it became integral to interview a professor to hear his views on this issue of graduate unemployment. Cyrus recommended Dr. Sajjad, who was one of his professors at the department. A much older gentleman than the previous three professors, Dr. Sajjad received all of his higher education degrees within Iran (he had never gone abroad). Similar to Dr. Hossain, Dr. Sajjad placed the burden on the graduates. Unlike Dr. Hossain, Dr. Sajjad focused on Islam and having faith in God. He quoted verses from the Quran, spoke of his youth, and

explained how "my generation did not have such high expectations"; they would get married and build a life with their spouse out of nothing. He blamed the younger generations for expecting to become successful overnight. He admitted that other departments at Sharif should provide more in assisting their students prosper after graduation but defended his department with its strong ties with the job market. Their internship program was outstanding, and the majority of their graduates acquired jobs – I discovered this to be true based on what Cyrus and other *Sharifis* had said. He mentioned that they may dislike their first job, and the pay may be insufficient, but insisted that with time and hard work they could excel. Considering this was the second time I heard this argument, it made me think of a proverb about how a fish that had never been caught on a fisherman's hook will never understand the pain of a fish that had. I explained this to Dr. Sajjad, and asked whether the generational difference, and the fact that he had never experienced unemployment, had made it difficult for him and his generation to understand the struggles of the younger generation. He did agree to an extent though countered by saying God has been and will always be helping regardless of the generation.

Dr. Baqir

While interviews were secured with professors from Karim and Cyrus' undergraduate departments (industrial and computer), I was not fortunate with Nader and Darius' department (mechanical engineering), or Ismail's (chemical engineering). With the aid of one of my newly formed contacts, an interview was secured with one of his former professors. Dr. Baqir was a professor at Sharif's Aerospace Engineering Department. Much of what he explained echoed that of his colleagues. He spoke of the barriers that limited students and graduates from realizing their professional aspirations, as well as the one-dimensional mentality that was pushed upon them. He went on to say that they were not given opportunities to learn and discover other areas of study or career paths. Instead, they were told what to study and where to study but there was no motivation. He recognized the struggles graduates face in the job market and attributed it to the volatility of Iran's domestic and international problems. Dr. Baqir also argued that graduates should not compare Iran to other countries because of the unique problems Iran had. On the one hand, he challenged the graduates to attempt to build a life within the barriers in Iran, yet on the other hand he understood why most graduates leave the country. While going abroad had its own struggles, at least there was some level of consistency from one day to the next; if rules and laws were abided you knew you could prosper with hard work. He added that there was no routine in Iran, you could not plan for the future.

Ms. Zaynab

One problem that resonated from the participants and other *Sharifis* – which was partially confirmed from the five professors – was the lack of guidance and support students received from the university, their department, and faculty. After listening to the professors defend their rational to why they could not assist their students more – either because (a) time did not permit it, (b) it was not their responsibility, or (c) it had not become a part of the culture yet – it became critical to hear from the university's guidance counselors to see what kind of guidance and support they were providing. Ms. Zaynab described how her office had incorporated a number of programs to acclimate incoming freshmen to life at Sharif. Her office also provided an open door policy to all students who require assistance with the pressures of Sharif. Ms. Zaynab believed many of the problems her students faced at Sharif could be traced back to their upbringing at home, at school, and within society. She spoke of the pressures and competition of having to be the top student while concurrently ignorant to what they were interested in pursuing academically and professionally. Considering this lack of guidance and support pre-dated their university years, it was important to interview a high school guidance counselor.

Mr. Sadiq

I initially connected with Mr. Sadiq through LinkedIn hopping he would fit the research criteria and become one of the participants. During our conversation he explained that he never had problems finding employment; he even worked part-time as a student. He graduated Sharif with his bachelors in 2019 and immediately started his masters. Although he was not a good match for the research we stayed in touch and became friends. After interviewing Ms. Zaynab, I recalled that Mr. Sadiq worked as a high school and konkur counselor, therefore I contacted him for an interview. Furthermore, the stories from the participants about their counselors' inexperience and indifference warranted further investigation. During our interview, Mr. Sadiq said he provided counseling on the phone, through WhatsApp, or in-person to students who were unclear on what university major to select. One obstacle he noticed with his students was the pressure from their parents to either become doctors or engineers. He explained how he disliked his bachelor's major (mechanical engineering) and no one assisted him in discovering what he liked beforehand, therefore when he advised his students, he would challenge them to view the positive and negative to every major they thought about selecting. He admitted that counselors during his time were very different; they would glance at the student's konkur ranking and tell them which major to select. Upon deeper analysis it became apparent that the

younger generation of professors and counselors were more (inter)active with their students to ensure the same mistakes were not repeated.

Mr. Kazim

Mr. Kazim was one of two stakeholders interviewed who worked at an organization within Sharif's Technology Services Complex – an ecosystem (operating since 2014) that housed many organizations, all dedicated to a particular aspect of assisting *Sharifis* prosper in the job market. This was the first of its kind at Sharif and what many called the pilot study that later influenced other universities to follow. Mr. Kazim worked at the Sharif Entrepreneur Center where they taught student(s) about entrepreneurship and guiding them on how to start their startup. One aspect of their work was protecting their students' ideas through non-disclosure agreements. He admitted that Iran had weak laws and even weaker enforcement in this regard, however his organization diligently worked to strengthen it for *Sharifis*. Another aspect of their work was supporting students in finding reliable and trustworthy investors because historically *Sharifis* have had to relinquish up-to 80% of their company for funding. In most instances, those providing the funding and acquiring up-to 80% stake in the startup were affiliated with the state. Other aspects of their work also included an orientation class for incoming freshmen, and weekly training courses where each class was taught by an expert in a particular field. Mr. Kazim acknowledged the struggles of not only the participants but the majority of *Sharifis* who have tried to prosper within the job market. He believed conditions were improving because of organizations like his and Sharif's Technology Services Complex that offered an alternative to *Sharifis* where departments and faculty were inadequate.

Mr. Rida

Considering Karim and Cyrus each participated at the Sharif Career School, it was important to learn more about this organization's operations and what their views were on graduate unemployment. Their office was located at Sharif's Technology Services Complex. Scheduling an interview with their director was very difficult. After six weeks of persistence, their director left the organization to complete his *sarbazi*. His replacement was not willing to meet; thus I asked a friend at the Complex if he could assist in scheduling an interview with someone at the Career School. After three additional weeks, I scheduled a meeting with one of their employees, Mr. Rida. The Sharif Career School was the counterpart to the Sharif Entrepreneur Center that focuses on helping *Sharifis* find employment. At the time of our interview (2019), Mr. Rida said their organization had been operational since 2015 yet most *Sharifis* have not heard of

them. Due to their small staff and funding they could not assist everyone who entered their office. Therefore, they interviewed applicants and accepted those who were identified as serious job seekers – which for them were students in their final year or semester, and recent graduates. Our conversation often returned to their mentorship program because that was the most pressing issue his office encountered. Mr. Rida described how "90% of *Sharifis* do not know what their interests, abilities, and skills are, and they feel lost". He also explained how *Sharifis* were unaware of what the job market was like and had unrealistic expectations as a result. As a result, the Sharif Career School advised its students on these matters. The Career School also provided training and seminars, resume and cover letter workshops, internship programs, and mock job interviews with real companies that sometimes evolved into real job offers.

Mr. Jawad

After learning what career service organizations within Sharif were providing students who were preparing to enter the job market, the focus shifted to organizations outside of Sharif that helped graduates in the job hunt. I first met with Mr. Jawad, the co-founder of an employment website (I will refer to it as JobMatch). Their function was very similar to many employment websites like Indeed, Monster, or Glassdoor. Their online platform connects companies with university graduates. The former (6,000 members) posted job openings and searched for individuals who matched their needs. The latter (15,000 members) created a profile, developed their online resume, and could apply to job postings. JobMatch also had a resume builder in case the graduate required assistance. Mr. Jawad explained that JobMatch was a bridge between companies and graduates, and did not provide person-to-person assistance. They did, however, provide sources and materials to assist their members evaluate themselves and discover their strengths and weaknesses. They also sent news letters and emails with updates on the job market. One of the leading issues Mr. Jawad determined from the feedback he received was that a gap existed, or there was a disconnect, between companies and graduates. Companies required particular skills that graduates were not being taught in university, and graduates were searching for positions that were unrealistic given the job market climate – "their expectations were too high" he said. He went on to say that some companies were starting to develop their own academies where they train their employees. This recurring theme that Sharif University and most of its departments and faculty were disconnected from the job market and unhelpful to students entering the job market was slowly being remedied by these independent organizations in and out of Sharif.

Mr. Hadi

I met Mr. Hadi through Karim. A Sharif graduate, Mr. Hadi was a successful entrepreneur who specialized in human resources (HR). He first had a successful employment website – similar to Mr. Jawad's JobMatch – which he sold to focus on his next startup, a human resources software that provided comprehensive HR tools and services to companies who were unable to have their own HR department. He also taught a business course at a private high school. Mr. Hadi did acknowledge the same shortcomings that Mr. Jawad, and the participants, described regarding the gap and disconnect between higher education and the job market. However, he did not agree with the extent to which the participants' criticized the job market and the government for why they were unable to achieve their professional aspirations inside Iran. He argued that if graduates learned to write a proper resume, strengthen their network, and improve their interviewing skills, they would have no trouble getting hired. Regarding societal influences, on the other hand, he complained of the subordinate nature of most students' inability in deciding their field of study or profession. Instead, they obey the direction of their school and family – and in most cases, the family follow societal trends. As a result, "industry bubbles" were formed – as he put it – where generations of graduates were pushed into one industry thus saturating that industry and causing high unemployment rates.

Mr. Askari

I met Mr. Askari through Nader. A Sharif graduate with a bachelor's in chemistry, Mr. Askari later founded and ran a startup accelerator. Based on a five-year contract, his accelerator provided a working station for the startups he invested in, along with mentoring (which often included changing team members to increase efficiency and success rates) and networking (delivering them to either sell their business or partner with an investor). In exchange for ten percent of the startup's shares. He explained that his accelerator differed from the others because he was not interested in discovering an idea and selling it – or the startup – for a profit. He wanted to cultivate a culture and community where generations could become successful. His company had 8,000 followers on its Telegram channel; 300 of those submitted membership applications (either as a startup or a prospective team member); and 30 were accepted, making up eight teams. Mr. Askari explained one of the reasons why most startups in Iran fail was because all the team members have an engineering background with no one willing or able to perform administrative, marketing, or accounting tasks – that was one weakness his accelerator tried to strengthen.

Dr. Mahdi

I first met Dr. Mahdi during the exploratory study. He held position at Ministry within the government. Over the years we became friends and colleagues, therefore, he was abreast of the research and willing to participate. Having worked for the Iranian government, Dr. Mahdi had first-hand knowledge and experience to either confirm or deny the criticisms the participants asserted. Surprisingly, he confirmed the majority of them. For example, there were branches of and individuals within the government that support and elevate specific careers and business over others. Although he did not elaborate on how and why this distinction was made, based on my other conversations, it appeared the deciding factor was due to nepotism or ideological allegiances. Focusing on higher education, he did state, "there is much resistance to change, and in most cases, they don't allow for change to happen". At that time, he was thinking of leaving the public sector to start his own company that provided mentoring and counseling for high school students. He argued that if you want to help university graduates find a job they like, you must start while they are younger so they find a major they like. He went on to say that students were powerless in thinking about their future, their dreams or goals, or make long-term plans. Instead, they do what they are told.

D. Exploratory fieldwork findings

The following are the findings from an exploratory fieldwork (see Appendix D for more detail). A 14-participant questionnaire and a series of in-depth interviews were conducted during the six weeks in Iran in the winter of 2017-2018. I visited four cities (Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, and Esfahan); nine universities (eight public, one private); seventeen professors ranging from economics and psychology to engineering and education; fourteen professionals from the academic, private, and public sectors, including the Ministry of Education; eight graduates and nine students. In Tehran, I visited the University of Tehran and Amir Kabir University (both public universities); a think-tank startup and a tourist hostel; three branches of the Ministry of Education: The Institute for Research & Planning in Higher Education (IRPHE), The Statistical Center of Iran, and Iran Doc (housing all Iranian academic publications). I interviewed seven professors, the founder of the think tank and hostel, the vice president of research at IRPHE, four Snapp drivers (Iran's equivalent to Uber), and four students. In Shiraz, I visited Shiraz University and Salman Farsi University (both public). I interviewed three professors, one university dean, three graduates, and four students; the questionnaire was also conducted in Shiraz. In Mashhad, I visited Ferdowsi University (public) and spoke with three professors. In Esfahan, I visited three public universities (University of Esfahan, Farhangian University, and Shayenshar University) and one private (Islamic Azad University of Esfahan). I interviewed four professors, one guidance counsellor, an undergraduate admissions director, one statistician, and one student.



Academic

1. Considering that students have to select an area of study in high school that will guide their collegiate career, infrequent interaction exists between the two institutions to ensure that a cohesive and logical transition exists from one's high school major to their university major. For example, a high school student interested in pursuing a bachelor in accounting can do so from any high school major, even art. On the other hand, architecture majors in university can only major in math in high school.
2. Guidance counselors at the high school and university level have historically been unqualified, unhelpful, inexperienced and at times disinterested (I say 'historically' because just recently it is beginning to improve). As a result, the vast majority of students do not know what they are getting themselves into. Most students are unaware of what university major they can pursue based on their high school major, and what career opportunities each university major leads to. Moreover, they are not encouraged to pursue a major they want but rather a major that correlates with their grades. As a result, the expectation or understanding that students have of their university major is challenged and contradicted by their experience.
3. The *Konkur* as the sole deciding factor for admissions disregards any academic, professional or extra-curricular achievements.
4. War veterans and their children (from the Eight-Year War against Iraq and the Syrian war) as well as individuals from rural areas of the country are awarded credit towards their *konkur* ranking which places them about one hundred spots higher. No official declaration has been made to how much credit they receive but my interviewees have speculated around one hundred.
5. There is a disproportionate acceptance rate between the STEM and non-STEM programs because the former requires physical equipment and labs that most universities cannot afford therefore resulting in either a less academically rigorous program (due to poor-quality, outdated or under-equipped labs) or no program at all. Contrarily, because the latter is comparatively more cost effective more programs have been established thus leading to over crowdedness and an influx of graduates into a job market ill-prepared to employ these individuals.
6. Programs' curriculum is overly theory based with very limited practical training which leads to graduates entering the job market with almost no tangible skill sets nor an understanding of work-place etiquette. Even though undergraduates are required to complete a one semester, ninety-hour internship they most often end up completing twenty hours at the most and not doing any work because companies view internships as a waste of their time to teach someone who will leave in a few months.
7. Most professors are uninterested in their students' academic asperations. Rather than encourage the student's academic and professional maturation, professors try to change their student to be more like them.
8. Male students offer monetary favors and females offer sexual favors to professors for better grades.

9. A profitable enterprise exists where undergraduates pay graduates to write their term papers, thesis, dissertations, final projects, etc.
10. There is very little interaction between universities and the job market. Throughout one's collegiate career – but particularly in one's final year – there is a fragmented support infrastructure in the sense of workshops (resume and cover letter for example), career services center, job fairs, or the like.

Government

1. During the Eight-Year War there was a high demand for doctors so universities were told (by the government) to increase their capacity and admit more pre-med students. But since then, an appropriate reassessment and recalibration has not been performed to properly reflect the current societal needs; thus, leading to an overpopulation of pre-med students and subsequently medical doctors.
2. Also, during the Eight-Year War the government made a strong push for families to have more children (because hundreds of thousands of the nation's youth were dying in the war) without considering and strategizing a long-term plan to anticipate this generation's entry into higher education and the job market.
3. The nation's higher education apparatus is extremely centralized at the Ministry of Education, who collaborates with the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance; and together they decide what quotas per program to impose on all universities based on the country's economic condition and job market demands.

Job market

1. The job market is not conducive for a knowledge based economy, but rather a labour based economy. The current job market is not structured to accommodate the large number of arts, social sciences and humanities graduates.
2. Once within the job market, individuals are left to their own devices. There are either no career services centers, temp agencies, job search engine websites, and the like, or they are primitive still in the infantile stages. Job hunting in 21st century Iran is the equivalent to 20th century America/Europe: newspapers, billboard signs, word of mouth, or connections.
3. If they have no prior work experience it will be difficult to gain employment because most companies require five years' experience. Individuals are able to intern and volunteer for those five years but without pay. Companies rarely hire their interns because they know the interns need the experience and a job more than the company needs them. Furthermore, with a new graduating class each year there is never a shortage of potential interns.
4. There is a very strong culture of nepotism to where (highly) qualified individuals are over looked in favor of family and friends – some of which may be unqualified.

5. If companies do hire outside their circle of family and friends they give preference to public university graduates (this does not include semi-public universities).
6. Often to gain employment one must project an outward appearance equivalent to how society has defined what a "good Muslim" is. For either gender this typically means the kind of clothes they wear, how they style their hair/head scarf, the level of facial hair/makeup they have, how they speak (tone and vocabulary) and act (praying and fasting). Therefore, the individuals who do not naturally fit this definition of a "good Muslim" have to either pretend or risk not getting hired.
7. If hired, one's success in a company is based more on their relationship with their boss then with their work ethic or work quality.
8. Many companies are in debt to one another therefore operating on credit which means lower wages, delayed paychecks and/or hiring freeze.

Parents

1. A parents' level of education, type of profession, and network (social, professional, political and otherwise) all have a direct impact on their child's future.
2. The level of discipline parents instill in their child can make the difference between an unemployed graduate becoming complacent because they live with their parents and have financial support or they continuously stay on the job hunt. In either case, most fathers are compelled to work beyond the retirement age because they still have to support their unemployed child. This cyclical paradigm is one example of a lack of job growth where fathers have to work to support their unemployed child.
3. Depending on their financial situation, their child may only be able to attend a public university because it is free. When selecting majors in their 150-list they may need to be more risk averse to ensure acceptance, which may mean picking majors they do not care for. On the other hand, their child can attend any university they want and almost major in any field they want.
4. Some parents do not allow their daughters to pick the major or the university they want if it means entering a male-dominated profession or moving away from home.
5. Either because of parental pressure and/or family honor, youth may not always pursue the major or profession they want (very recently this appears to be less influential).

Personal

1. Fortitude: a youth's confidence and commitment level towards their future and goal(s) (academic, professional or otherwise) can sway in either direction depending on a multitude of degrees. The degree to which they like or dislike their major, university or job for example; or, the cultural, social and political environment they have to manoeuvre in to obtain their definition of a successful standard of living.

   a. In the case of the latter, they may become hopeless and discouraged to where getting good grades or finding the job they want becomes increasingly less important over time. So much so that they may either take any job they can get, remain unemployed, try to immigrate abroad, or – worst case scenario, but very common in Iran – end up depressed, suicidal and/or in a life of crime and substance abuse/addiction – which has been a growing crisis in Iran for at least the past ten years.

   b. In the case of the former, their comparative "success" can be the result of family support, academic excellence, a strong network, professional resilience, the unwavering grit to gain any kind of employment, and/or successfully immigrate abroad.

2. Temperament: a student may have the ambition to become a medical doctor or a psychologist, for example, but not the temperament to handle cadavers and blood, or patients who have been sexually abused. With their undergraduate curriculum being theory based and their guidance counselors being imprudent (for the most part), by the time they discover their inability to handle such conditions may be too late as they have already spent two or three years (at least) towards this goal.

3. Brain Drain: the purpose of attending higher education is, for most, the best opportunity to leave Iran on a student visa and rarely return (Iran has been suffering from the brain drain since 2000).

4. Intergender atmosphere: after twelve years of education at a single-sex school to be immersed at a mixed-sex university can be a distraction or a blessing depending on how one looks at it. For some, learning and academic achievements are not the reasons they enroll in higher education.

5. Comfort-zone: because the family nucleus and home town are immensely important, most students prefer to stay local – or relatively close – when selecting their major/university in their 150-list. This sometimes means compromising on the major – if their *konkur* ranking was not high enough – to be accepted at a local university.

6. Breakout: on the other hand, creating distance is desired for some females trying to find a level of freedom from a culture that endorses the narrative of a submissive woman and a patriarchal family structure that enforces it. Once again, compromises on their major may have to be made to accomplish this.

7. Military: because males (of sound mind and body) must enlist in a two-year mandatory military service, most enroll in higher education to postpone this. Which, for some, means compromising on their major to insure admissions. Once they are enrolled the military grants a temporary exemption until for whatever reason (dropout, graduate, trying to change major) they are out of university for a year. There are even some who continue with a masters and doctorate to not only postpone their military service but also reduce the time and improve their work environment (a high school graduate serves two years manning a post out in the elements. A PhD graduate serves 18 months behind a desk).

8. Passing time: some attend higher education because they feel there are no other options. For most men, they feel there are no job prospects, no money, they cannot marry as a

result, and their competition is highly educated so they have to compete for a spouse. For most women: if they do not enroll in higher education they will have to get married and become a house wife.

9. Social prestige: students following their friends, peers and generation in majoring in the field(s) that is most popular at that moment. This is seen more with youth from wealthier families. Middle and lower-class youth are, for the most part, selecting a major they know will give them the best chance of gaining employment.
10. Career prestige: some students pursue a particular field of study because of the prestige associated with it in Iran; most notably: doctor and engineer. Of these who graduate and remain unemployed believe their job (or career) must reflect the degree they have. That means an unwillingness to accept a position that they feel will categorize them as underemployed – even if it is a position that may lead to better opportunities in the future.

E. Analysis checkpoints

1. Look for empirical assertions supported by the data. Look at what the participants said in the transcripts to find those meaning units.
2. Use narrative vignettes and exact quotations of participants to support your assertions […] with evidence from transcripts, observations, reflective journals, and any other documentary evidence.
3. Scan all other reports, documents, letters, journal entries, demographic data, and so on. Use direct references. Connect those to your analysis and interpretation.
4. Include interpretive commentary related to the data, because data simply do not speak for themselves.
5. Include a theoretical discussion and relate your data to the theory that guided the study.
6. Be sure to include a thorough description of your role as the researcher as part of the analysis and the history of the inquiry, and include your beliefs on the topic.
7. State clearly any and all ethical issues that arose in the study.
8. Have a peer review, outside reader, or auditor review your transcripts and look at your preliminary and final categories.
9. Work for saturation and sustainability of your data.

(Janesick, 2011, p.177-178)

1. Affixing codes to a set of field notes drawn from observations or interviews.
2. Noting reflections or other remarks in the margins.
3. Sorting and sifting through these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences.
4. Isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences, and taking them out to the field in the next wave of data collection.
5. Gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database.
6. Confronting those generalizations with a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories.

(Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.9)

F. English translation of Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

(Translated version, in Farsi, will be provided once in Iran)

CUREC Approval Reference: ED-CIA-18-173

Unrealized Professional Aspirations inside Iran:

The Lived Experiences of Unemployed Graduates from Sharif University

The purpose of this study is to explore how the professional aspirations of unemployed Sharif graduates have changed since their undergraduate years and during their time in the job market.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or academic penalty.	
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from the University of Oxford where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
8	I consent to being audio recorded.	
9	I hereby assign to the researcher all copyright in my contribution for use in all work stemming from this project and future projects.	

10	I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	
11	I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication against my name.	
12	I agree to take part in the study.	
Optional:	I agree for research data collected in this study to be given to researchers, including those working outside of the EU, to be used in other research studies. I understand that any data that leave the research group will be fully anonymized so that I cannot be identified.	
Optional:	I agree for my personal data to be kept in a secure database for the purpose of contacting me about future studies.	
Optional:	I agree to have my audio recording translated into English by a third party translator.	

Name of Participant	Date	Signature

Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

G. English translation of Oral Consent Form

ORAL CONSENT

(Translated version, in Farsi, will be provided once in Iran)

Where separate written participant information has already been read by the participant beforehand and oral consent is then sought. Record this consent process using a digital recorder (if participant has consented to this) or by using a Record of Consent Form.

Hello again, my name is Reza Khanzadeh from the University of Oxford and I wanted to talk to you about the project I am working on; the same project you read about in the participant information sheet I gave you earlier.

To recap, the aim of this study is to explore how the aspirations of unemployed Sharif graduates have changed towards the job market since their undergraduate years.

Are you still interested in taking part in this project? *[Await confirmation]*. Now I'd like to confirm some of the details of the project to make sure you understand what's involved for you:

1) This is a project about how the aspirations of unemployed Sharif graduates have changed towards the job market since their undergraduate years. As well as what constitutes their lived experience of graduate unemployment.

2) If you agree to take part, I would like to interview you three times, each for approximately two hours.

3) The risk level is very low because my research is in no way politically or religiously motivated. It is strictly and purely an educational study.

4) You don't have to agree to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before, during and after the interviews; you can also withdraw at any time during the interviews without giving a reason and without any negative consequences.

5) I will be the only individual with access to your personal information and the answers you provide. If at any time you decide to withdraw yourself and your data from the study all of your data and information will be permanently deleted. All paper documents will be shredded and discharged into a private trash receptacle. All electronic files will be permanently erased using a commercial software application designed to remove said files

6) You also have three (3) months from the date of our last interview to withdraw yourself and/or your data from this study.

7) You are aware that an Oxford University Research Ethics committee has approved this research project and how to contact me (in the first instance), my supervisor or the committee in case of any concerns or complaints. I have given you the project's ethics reference number and relevant contact details. To reiterate, you can contact Dr. Liam

Gearson, the Chair of the Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee at liam.gearson@education.ox.ac.uk or by mail at Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD.

8) I will not keep any of your details for longer than necessary. I won't use your name next to data you provide, unless you would like to be named. I will also ask your permission for quoting you directly in research publications.

9) I will store any information you provide safely and confidentially. All word documents, audio files and any other electronic files will be password protected, encrypted and saved only on my personal laptop. I will keep the research data for at least three (3) years after publication.

10) The terms and phrases used to save all the password protected and encrypted word documents and the password protected and encrypted audio file – as well as any other relevant documents – will not include your name or any other personal indicators to identify you as the participant of this interview. No other personal or sensitive data and information will be obtained from you other than your name. The only individual who will have access to these files is myself.

11) I would like to be able to use your anonymized data in future studies, and to share this data with other researchers.

12) I would like to audio record you unless you say that I cannot.

13) You are aware that my written work will be published online in the Oxford Research Archive?

14) The project may be published on a later date in an academic journal or book.

15) No sensitive personal data will be collected.

16) Are you still willing to take part? Do you give your permission for me to interview you as well as audio record you?

17) Do you give your permission for me to re-contact you for follow-up interviews?

[*Await confirmation]* So if you're happy with all of that, and have no more questions, let's start.

H. English translation of Participant Information Sheet

Unrealized Professional Aspirations inside Iran:

The Lived Experiences of Unemployed Graduates from Sharif University

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Translated version, in Farsi, will be provided once in Iran)

Ethics Approval Reference: ED-CIA-18-173

1. ***What is the purpose of this research?***

The purpose of this study is to explore how the professional aspirations of unemployed Sharif graduates have changed since their undergraduate years and during their time in the job market.

2. ***Why have I been invited to take part?***

You have been invited because you represent the individuals essential for this project: young, unemployed, bachelor-graduate, males, with a degree in engineering from Sharif University.

3. ***Do I have to take part?***

No. You can ask questions about the study before deciding whether or not to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may withdraw yourself and your data from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty, by advising the researcher of this decision. If you do agree to participate and at any time decide you want to remain anonymous, your personal information will be permanently deleted.

The data and information that has been collected or will be collected (if you decide to withdraw at a later date) will be recorded and stored on an audio device (either in the voice memo app on the interviewer's iPhone and/or an audio recorder) as well as hand written notes. If at any time you decide to withdraw yourself and your data from the study, all of the aforementioned data and information will be permanently deleted. You will have three (3) months from the date of our last interview to withdraw yourself and/or your data from this study.

4. ***What will happen to me if I take part in the research?***

There will be three rounds of interviews involving yourself (the interviewee) and the interviewer. The location of the interview will be at a mutually agreed upon location by both parties to ensure you are comfortable. You will be asked to talk about our life history from

your time in university until the present. You will also be provided allotted time to freely and openly speak about any concerns or thoughts you have on this topic. The duration of the interview depends on the substance of information discussed. However, a standard interview on average will take two (2) hours. Therefore, it is imperative that you and your interviewer collectively allocate a three (3) hour time slot in order to pre-emptively prepare in the event that the interview exceeds the initial two (2) hours.

If you are happy to take part in the interview, you will be asked to coordinate with your interviewer on a mutually agreed upon date, time and location to conduct the interview. Upon arrival, your interviewer will provide you with a written information sheet explaining the scope and purpose of this research. He will also verbally re-explain the scope and purpose of this research and the purpose of the interview and give you the chance to ask any questions. If you are still happy to take part, you will then be asked to sign a consent form (or give verbal consent). Throughout the duration of the interview there will be absolutely no video-taping or photography. Audio-taping is standard protocol for this interview but if you are more comfortable without audio-taping please explain your case to the interviewer and the two of you will determine a mutually agreeable alternative.

5. ***Are there any potential risks in taking part?***

No. There are no potential risks in taking part in this study.

6. ***Are there any benefits in taking part?***

There will be no direct benefit to you in taking part in this study.

7. ***Expenses and payments***

There will be no payment for taking part in this study.

8. ***What will happen to any samples I give?***

There will be no samples taken in this study.

9. ***What happens to the data provided?*** [9]

9 Please refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance on Data Collection and Management (BPG 09)

The research data and information gathered during the interview will be stored confidentially using a password protected and encrypted word document and password protected and encrypted windows media player file.

The hand-written notes will be typed and transferred into a password protected and encrypted word document within eight (8) hours after the interview is over. This password protected and encrypted word document will be securely stored for a minimum of three (3) years only in the personal laptop of the interviewer. Once the hand-written notes are transferred to a password protected and encrypted word document the pieces of paper used to take said notes will be shredded and discharged into a private trash receptacle.

The audio-taping from the iPhone voice memo app and/or the audio recording device will be transferred in the personal laptop of the interviewer within two (2) hours after the interview is over. The password protected and encrypted audio file will be securely stored for a minimum of three (3) years only in the personal laptop of the interviewer. Once the audio file(s) have been transferred, the original recording from both the iPhone voice memo app and the audio recording device will be permanently erased using a commercial software application designed to remove said files. The transcription of the audio file to a password protected and encrypted word document will be completed within twenty-four (24) hours after the interview is over. This password protected and encrypted word document will also be securely stored for a minimum of three (3) years only in the personal laptop of the interviewer.

The terms and phrases used to save both the password protected and encrypted word documents and the password protected and encrypted audio file – as well as any other relevant documents – will not include your name or any other personal indicators to identify you as the participant of this interview. No other personal or sensitive data and information will be obtained from you other than your name. The only individual who will have access to these files is the interviewer. If at any time after the interview either you or the interviewer would like to re-visit these documents and files for accuracy purposes a conversation between the two of you will commence to mutually agree upon the best approach in sharing the documents and files.

In addition, we would like your permission to use direct quotes for this specific research.

We would also like your permission to audio-tape the entirety of the interview. If there are moments you would like to be ‘off the record’ please verbally express so prior to continuing with your statement.

We would also like your permission to use anonymized data in future studies, and to share data with other research collaborators, members of the research team and other academics.

All personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before information is shared with other researchers or results are made public.

10. Will the research be published?

The final paper – resulting from the data and information gathered in this interview – will be in the form of a Doctoral Thesis (DPhil or PhD dissertation) and will not be initially published.

However, the University of Oxford is committed to the dissemination of its research for the benefit of society and the economy and, in support of this commitment, has established an online archive of research materials. This archive includes digital copies of student theses successfully submitted as part of a University of Oxford postgraduate degree programme. Holding the archive online gives easy access for researchers to the full text of freely available theses, thereby increasing the likely impact and use of that research. This research will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be openly accessible.

Furthermore, there is a likelihood that one or more articles and/or a book will be published at a later date which will incorporate the data and information from this interview. In this case, all research data and records will be stored for an additional three (3) years after publication or public release of the work of the research.

As a result, we would like your permission to use all the data and information gathered from this interview for future publications. If expressed to the contrary, prior to publication you will be informed and your consent will be requested.

11. Who is organising and funding the research?

Mohamad Reza Khanzadeh

12. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: ED-CIA-18-173).

13. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?

Khanzadeh – *Unrealized Professional Aspirations inside Iran*

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to the relevant researcher, Mohamad Reza Khanzadeh at 0990-922-0324, or his supervisor, Dr. David Mills at +44 186-527-4053 or david.mills@education.ox.ac.uk, who will do his best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within ten (10) working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:

Dr. Liam Gearson
Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee

Personal email: liam.gearson@education.ox.ac.uk

Office Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk

Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

14. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:
Mr. Mohamad Reza Khanzadeh
DPhil (PhD) student in Education
Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford, OX2 6PY
Iran telephone number: 0990-922-0324
Oxford telephone number: +44 737-829-9185
reza.khanzadeh@education.ox.ac.uk

I. First CUREC approval

Liam Gearon

Fri 4/27/2018 12:25 PM

To:Reza Khanzadeh <reza.khanzadeh@education.ox.ac.uk>;

Cc:David Mills <david.mills@education.ox.ac.uk>; Education Research Office <research.office@education.ox.ac.uk>;

Dear Mohamad Reza Khanzadeh,

The Miseducation of Iran: how education reform can lead to economic growth and stability

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Things to note: please do ensure that the travel insurance and all related documents (section 10) are completed fully, and your supervisor and the University have full contact details for you during your visit.

You state 'BERA guidelines will apply' . Here you should be of the recent revised guidelines, and ideally you
could have stated more clearly how these would be applied in Iran.

You also state that:
Regarding my participants: this research is in no way politically or religiously motivated – which are the two main topics within Iran that will lead to risks, concerns, dangers, and the like. This research is strictly and purely an educational and economic study.
You should carefully consult with your supervisor on what might happen if such matters are raised.

If your research involves participants whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question (this includes those under 18 and vulnerable adults), then it is advisable to read the following NSPCC professional reporting requirements for cases of suspected abuse

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/information-service/factsheet-child-abuse-reporting-requirements-professionals.pdf

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

Sincerely,

With kind regards,

Liam

Dr LF Gearon
Chair DREC

Liam Francis Gearon, PhD, FHEA, FRSA

Senior Research Fellow
Harris Manchester College
University of Oxford
http://www.hmc.ox.ac.uk/people/dr-liam-gearon/

Associate Professor
Department of Education
University of Oxford

Editor of the forthcoming (2018) *Routledge International Handbook of Universities, Security and Intelligence Studies*

Guest Editor of the *British Journal of Education Studies*
on Education, Security and Intelligence Studies

Guest Editor of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*
on Philosophy, Literature and Education

Conjoint (Full) Professor, Newcastle University, Australia

Adjunct Professor, Australian Catholic University

J. Second CUREC approval

RE: CUREC

Liam Gearon <liam.gearon@education.ox.ac.uk>

Thu 8/1/2019 5:49 AM

To: Reza Khanzadeh <reza.khanzadeh@education.ox.ac.uk>; Education Research Office <research.office@education.ox.ac.uk>
Cc: Maia Chankseliani <maia.chankseliani@education.ox.ac.uk>; David Mills <david.mills@education.ox.ac.uk>; James Robson <james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk>

Dear Reza

Thank you for this considered update. We can simply note this as a minor alteration, so it does not materially impact on the ethical implications of your CUREC 1.

Jackie, we can note this for the records.

Kindest

Liam

From: Reza Khanzadeh
Sent: 31 July 2019 23:13
To: Liam Gearon; Education Research Office
Cc: Maia Chankseliani; David Mills; James Robson
Subject: RE: CUREC
Importance: High

Hello Dr. Gearon,

I hope you are well and this email reaches you in good spirits. I have an update on a new development in my fieldwork, as it may effect my CUREC.

I have recently decided to hire translators, to help me translate the audio files from each of my participant interviews. I currently have 5 participants and 5 translators. I am dedicating 1 translator to 1 participant. I have asked 4 of my participants if they are ok with me using a translator and they all said yes. Maia recommended I alter my consent form and information sheet to reflect this change, which I will do tomorrow.

Is there anything I need to do regarding my CUREC to remain in good standing? Thank you.

Sincerely,
Reza Khanzadeh
University of Oxford

From: Liam Gearon <liam.gearon@education.ox.ac.uk>
Sent: Tuesday, April 30, 2019 7:40:20 PM
To: Reza Khanzadeh <reza.khanzadeh@education.ox.ac.uk>; Education Research Office <research.office@education.ox.ac.uk>
Cc: Jackie Bridges <jackie.bridges@education.ox.ac.uk>; Maia Chankseliani <maia.chankseliani@education.ox.ac.uk>; David Mills <david.mills@education.ox.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: CUREC

Dear Reza

cc. Maia and David

Thank you for this – we can note your changes and you do not need a new form/ application.

However please consult with your supervisors carefully as to how you are going to maintain anonymity with a single university study.

Kindest regards

Liam Gearon
Chair, DREC

From: Reza Khanzadeh
Sent: 30 April 2019 15:24
To: Education Research Office
Cc: Liam Gearon; Jackie Bridges
Subject: Re: CUREC
Importance: High

Hello,

I hope all is well. There have been some changes to my research and fieldwork. My advisors (David Mills and Maia Chankseliani) recommended I inform you of these changes. In short, my research is more focused:

1. Section B-14-a: instead of "different universities and cities" I am focusing on Sharif University in Tehran, Iran
2. Section B-14-b: Inclusion criteria are young, male, un(der)employed, bachelor-graduates, with a degree in engineering from Sharif University, in Tehran, Iran. All of my participants will be the legal adult age of 18. I will conduct in-depth biographical narrative interviews with 4 to 5 individuals.

Thank you,

Reza

From: Education Research Office
Sent: Wednesday, May 16, 2018 4:55:02 PM
To: Reza Khanzadeh
Subject: RE: CUREC

Dear Reza
We don't issue letters just approval emails.
BW
Jackie

K. Fieldwork Safety and Risk Assessment approval

Jackie Bridges

From: Jackie Bridges
Sent: 05 December 2018 15:11
To: Reza Khanzadeh
Cc: David Mills; Susan James Relly; Louise Mireh
Subject: FW: new template
Attachments: Fieldwork Form.pdf

Dear Reza

Your risk assessment for your fieldwork to Tehran has been approved by the department. Action is now required from you to complete the on-line travel Insurance application. Please note you will need to upload a copy of your risk assessment to the insurance data base.

You now are required to apply for University travel Insurance for this travel, please follow this link and make an application and await conformation your insurance is approved.
Please apply here http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/finance/insurance/travel/

While you are away please:

Keep a copy of your risk assessment to hand in case you need to refer to it;
Check in regularly with your supervisor/line manager and update your supervisor/line manager and myself on any changes to your itinerary, contact details or any developments which might affect your health, safety or welfare while you are away. Please discuss with your supervisor check-in arrangements for any periods they are unavailable;
If there is a major incident while you are away please also contact your supervisor to let us know you are OK or whether you need any further support or assistance* . Please also remember that you can get consular assistance from your own government if necessary.

I also recommend you sign up via the FCO at https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/email-signup for email updates regarding the country you will be visiting.

We will be in contact regarding Insurance application as soon as possible, once you have approval please ensure you have to hand your policy number and contact details when traveling.

Best wishes

Louise Mireh
Safety Officer

Louise Mireh- Health and Safety Officer
University of Oxford | Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford. OX2 6PY
: 01865 6-11033
: louise.mireh@education.ox.ac.uk
Web: www.education.ox.ac.uk
Click here to find us on the interactive map

Please consider the environment. Do not print this email unless you need to.

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Jackie Bridges

From:	Jackie Bridges
Sent:	05 December 2018 15:11
To:	Reza Khanzadeh
Cc:	David Mills; Susan James Relly; Louise Mireh
Subject:	FW: new template
Attachments:	Fieldwork Form.pdf

Dear Reza

Your risk assessment for your fieldwork to Tehran has been approved by the department. Action is now required from you to complete the on-line travel Insurance application. Please note you will need to upload a copy of your risk assessment to the insurance data base.

You now are required to apply for University travel Insurance for this travel, please follow this link and make an application and await conformation your insurance is approved.
Please apply here http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/finance/insurance/travel/

While you are away please:

Keep a copy of your risk assessment to hand in case you need to refer to it;
Check in regularly with your supervisor/line manager and update your supervisor/line manager and myself on any changes to your itinerary, contact details or any developments which might affect your health, safety or welfare while you are away. Please discuss with your supervisor check-in arrangements for any periods they are unavailable;
If there is a major incident while you are away please also contact your supervisor to let us know you are OK or whether you need any further support or assistance* . Please also remember that you can get consular assistance from your own government if necessary.

I also recommend you sign up via the FCO at https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/email-signup for email updates regarding the country you will be visiting.

We will be in contact regarding Insurance application as soon as possible, once you have approval please ensure you have to hand your policy number and contact details when traveling.

Best wishes

Louise Mireh
Safety Officer

Louise Mireh- Health and Safety Officer
University of Oxford | Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford. OX2 6PY
☎: 01865 6-11033
✉: louise.mireh@education.ox.ac.uk
Web: www.education.ox.ac.uk
Click here to find us on the interactive map

Please consider the environment. Do not print this email unless you need to.

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L. Insurance approval

Jackie Bridges

From: Louise Mireh
Sent: 02 January 2019 10:18
To: Jackie Bridges
Subject: Fw: Fieldwork Safety & Risk Assessment application Iran

Hi Jackie,

Reza's trip is now approved.

Best wishes,

Louise

From: Anna Wright
Sent: 20 December 2018 01:30
To: Louise Mireh
Subject: RE: Fieldwork Safety & Risk Assessment application Iran

Hi Louise

Thank you for your email.

Sorry I couldn't get back to you yesterday but I am back in the office today and have just received an email from the insurers.

'After reading through the information, this looks like a well planned trip in conjunction with local authorities who the Insured is working in conjunction with and who are also providing various support to the project.

Noting the potential use of helicopters & the update that this will no longer be the case, I confirm we can cover Helicopter Travel within the standard terms and conditions, however it is if any Off Shore Travel is being undertaken where we need additional underwriting information for such travel.

With regards to the carrying large amounts of cash, I note that this will be covered elsewhere (although the notes of continued in the RA show good risk mitigation)

On the understanding noted above, I confirm cover within the existing terms and conditions of the Policy.'

I understand that there will be no helicopter travel or large amounts of cash but if this does change please let me know.

Kind regards,
Anna

Anna Wright, Insurance Assistant
Cert CI
Oxford Mutual Ltd, University of Oxford Finance Division,
23-38 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford OX1 2ET
Tel 01865-616078, www.admin.ox.ac.uk/finance/insurance

Travel Insurance Application Approved - TI-005822 Interviewing young Iranian men

No Reply Travel Insurance

Wed 1/2/2019 2:38 PM

To: Reza Khanzadeh <reza.khanzadeh@education.ox.ac.uk>;

Cc: UAS Insurance <insurance@admin.ox.ac.uk>; Mohamad Khanzadeh <reza.khanzadeh@seh.ox.ac.uk>; Louise Mireh <louise.mireh@education.ox.ac.uk>; Jackie Bridges <jackie.bridges@education.ox.ac.uk>;

Dear Mr. Mohamad Reza Khanzadeh,

Thank you for your travel insurance application for your trip – Interviewing young Iranian men. Your application for insurance has been approved and you are now insured for travel for this trip. You can view your application here: https://travelinsurance.admin.ox.ac.uk/

When you travel, please remember to take a copy of the Confirmation and Summary of Cover and emergency contact information with you. These can be found at https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/finance/insurance/travel/

The policy holder and reference number, as well as emergency contact information are provided below.

Policy Holder: Oxford Mutual Limited

Your Reference Number: 17-PAT-0000002033

Emergency Contact Information:

AonProtect assistance helpline: +44 (0)20 7173 7797

Website: www.aonprotectassistance.com

The Helpline is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year. The facility is valid whilst your University Travel Insurance is placed with AonProtect.

If you are unfortunate enough to require medical treatment, please ensure you or a colleague contact the insurer's Assistance Provider at the earliest opportunity.

If you suffer a theft or loss of personal belongings you must obtain a report from the local police. Ensure you get a report reference number.

Claims must be submitted within 28 days of your return to the UK, or in the event of cancellation within 28 days of the date of cancellation. For full details on how to make a claim please visit https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/finance/insurance/travel/howtomakeatravelinsuranceclaim

Before you depart, please sign up to receive FCO travel advisories for the country or countries you are visiting - you can register for these at https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

If you have any queries regarding this matter please do not hesitate to contact your department travel administrator.

Best wishes for your forthcoming trip.

Kind regards.