



Iran: A Concise Overview

by
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With an area of 635, 932 sq. mi (1, 647,063 sq. mi), Iran (same as Persia) is located in southwest Asia. Iran is bound to the north by the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan; to the west by Iraq and Turkey; to the east by Pakistan and Afghanistan; and to the south by the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. The major geographical features of Iran include the Elburz mountains (18,000), which stretch from east to west in the north of the plateau and the Zagros range (13,000), which stretches from north to south in the west. The depression in the south and east of these mountains forms two vast deserts called the Loot and the Kavir. As one travels south, the cooler climate becomes increasingly moderate and, eventually warm. Irrigation uses either overland resources like the Sefid, Atrak, Karun, and other rivers or it makes use of the ancient system of underground conduits known as *qanat*.

Iran has a population of 65,612,000 with a population density of 103 per sq. mi. (57% urban). Iran's ethnic mix includes 51% Persian, 24% Azerbaijani Turk, and 7% Kurd. The principal languages spoken are Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Luri. The population is concentrated along the above-mentioned rivers which take source in the major elevations mentioned above. Between 95-98% of Iran's populations is Shi'ite Muslim. About 30,000 Zoroastrians, 330,000 Christians, and 32,000 Jews also live in Iran. Iran's major cities are [Tehran](#) (capital): 6,000,000; Isfahan: 1,500,000; Meshed: 1,400,000; Tabriz: 971,000; and Shiraz: 848,000.

Before the advent of the Indo-European Iranians, the plateau presently known as Iran was occupied by a primitive people who lived in pise housing and buried their dead beneath the floor of their dwelling. Gradually, they discovered fire, melted metals, and produced ceramic utensils. They also became involved in trade, created governance through the female line, and designated ownership by issuing signature seals.

The Iranians, who invaded from the north, already had a rich history and belief system. Having passed the stages of totemism and deification, they were monotheists, believing in the chief deity Mazda and a host of lower gods. Man, a creation of Mazda, struggled with an invisible evil intruder trapped in his domain. Guided and aided by Mazda, a race of man-gods was created to lead humanity to its full potential. Over time, mythical beings like Kayumars (the first man and first king), Faridun, Siyavosh, and Kaykhusrau, guided by the *farr*, led humanity to Zoroaster, an intermediary between Mazda and His worshipers.

With the rise of Cyrus the Great and his conquest of Media, Lydia, and Babylonia, myth turned into reality and the Persian Empire was born. Subsequent monarchs, Darius and Xerxes, expanded the domain of the good religion as far as India to the East and Athens to the West.

The Achaemenians' attempt at annexation of the Greek States to their Empire cost them dearly. In the 4th century B.C., Alexander of Macedon invaded Persia and subjected it to a century of Greek rule. The strong ties of the Iranians to their land and to their divinely ordained kings helped them overcome foreign domination. Iran was freed by the

Parthians who stemmed the tide of Hellenism. Building on the reconstruction efforts of the last Parthian kings, the Sassanians, themselves belonging to a priestly caste, reestablished the divine and the social hierarchy that reflected the will of Mazda.

While the inflexibility of Greek laws prevented Iranian culture's incorporation into the Greek world, the flexibility of the Islamic culture brought by the Arabs who overran the Empire of the Sassanids in the 7th century allowed the incorporation. Within the parameters of the Islamic Empire, sophisticated Iranians reshaped their world by infusing their ancient culture with elements from the new message. At a time that ancient Iran was undergoing a process of urbanization and intellectual growth, the message of Mazda, corrupted by the *mu'bad*s, was easily displaced by the message of Allah brought by the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad.

Although Baghdad continued to remain the hub of activities in the Islamic Empire in the west, a similarly viable center of sciences, cultures, and arts came into existence in the east as well. This to the point that by AD 1,000, the Bukhara of the Samanids competed successfully with Baghdad and, in some instances, eclipsed that center. It was at Bukhara, for instance, that incomparable figures like Ibn-i Sina, Al-Biruni, and al-Razi came to the fore and made lasting contributions to medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and many other fields. In the long run, however, it was not so much the Iranians, its creators and guardians, but the Turks and Mongol Ilkhans who nourished the Iranian heritage to make it their own.

This situation, too, did not last long. In subsequent centuries, the emphasis on hard sciences gave way to a development of literature, calligraphy, and architecture. Two giants of Persian literature, Muslih al-Din Sa'di (1213-1292) and Shams al-Din Hafiz (1326-1396) added breadth and depth to Persian thought. The former, after a life of travels, settled in his home town of Shiraz and wrote two monumental works, one a major contribution to ethics. The latter perfected the art of the *ghazal* (sonnet), in the process, systematizing the Sufic thought of his time.

The 16th century saw an era of global change. Marco Polo had opened the Orient to the West as a major center of trade and development. The Safavids, therefore, dealt with not only tribal and regional problems but with complex international problems as well. To accommodate the new era, they made Shi'ism the official religion of Iran, promoted tolerance by showcasing their treatment of Armenians, and promoted that to a limited degree of Europeanization of the country. The turquoise domes of the mosques in Isfahan proper and the steeple of the church of [Julfa](#) bespeak this multi-lateral attitude of the Safavids.

Qajar rule (1795-1925) is characterized by the intrusion of British and Russian political and economic domination and by a steady rise of nationalism. Twice defeated, Iran ceded to Russia the region west of the Caspian by the 1813 Gulistan Treaty and the region east of the Caspian by the 1825 Turkmenchai Treaty. There were also other major economic concessions. Furthermore, debts to Britain incurred to pay war indemnities and other royal expenses, led to additional lucrative concessions to Britain, including the 1872

Reuter concession to build a railroad, the 1890 concession on tobacco, and the 1901 William D'Arcy concession on oil. These concessions, acerbated by capitulation and tax-free foreign merchandise which saturated the Iranian market, pushed Iranian economy to the verge of collapse.

There was, however, a positive aspect to this. Recognizing the shortcomings of the ruling elite, progressive individuals in the military, at court, and among the clerics and the bazaar called on patriotic Iranian intellectuals to foster Iranian nationalism and, through education, adoption of modern trends, and a constitution unify the people, reform the government, and overthrow the foreign yoke. A constitution was granted in 1906.

Against the decision of the Parliament which upheld the rights of the people, the Shah sided with Russia while Britain created a third force out of the Iranian tribes, petty merchants, prisoners, and even cutthroats. None of these, not even the 1907 partition of the country into commercial zones, however, restored the direct foreign influence that had dominated Iranian politics. Before long, Russia's influence was phased out by the Soviet State while Britain tried to make Iran a protectorate (1919).

The Iran that the Pahlavis (1925-1979) inherited was feudal. It was divided along regional and tribal lines and dominated by foreign ideological and economic interests. The interests of Britain and the Pahlavis converged at several junctures, including unification of the country wherein Britain could develop a sizable market for its manufactured goods, suppression of public consciousness, especially political consciousness through denial of proper education, and division of profits resulting from an unencumbered access to natural and human resources as well as trade in manufactured household goods, cosmetics, movies, and pharmaceuticals. Their interests diverged where Iranian nationalism, the nightmare of British politicians working in Iran, was concerned. In 1953 Iranian nationalism put an end to overt British dominance.

No longer interested in territorial expansion, the Soviets engineered the creation of a Social Democratic Party in Baku, Azerbaijan, with land distribution forming a major plank in its platform. This led, in 1920 to the Jangali Movement and the formation of the Communist Party of Iran. The movement was defeated in 1922 and the Party was officially dissolved in 1934. In 1942, however, the Tudeh Party of Iran rose from the ashes of the defunct CP of Iran with an enhanced platform and better defined goals. Within seven years, using an aborted attempt at the Shah's life as reason, the Tudeh, too, was outlawed.

Using a program of secular nationalism, the Pahlavis made two attempts at reform. The first, a progressive reform devised to decrease political and economic dependence, was relatively successful. It ushered Iran into the new age. The second, known as the "White Revolution," failed for a number of reasons among them flawed planning and disregard for the rights, let alone the sentiments, of Iran's growing middle class. Rather than adjusting Western progress to the needs of Iran and its people, the "White Revolution" tried to reshape Iran and its people to the needs of the West.

Throwing off the British yoke was a national ideal. Germany was approached twice, before each World War, to supply Iran with means--a steel mill, for instance--that would make Iran technologically self-sufficient. Each time a world war destroyed the plans. In the 1950's, Muhammad Musaddiq, having been denied assistance by the United States, used the rights of the Iranian people to expel both the Shah and the British. The U.S., with the help of the CIA, returned the Shah to Iran. Unknowingly, the US also inherited the legacy of oppression that Britain had fostered in the country. The return of the Shah, although a major blow, did not end Iranian nationalism.

The return of the Shah also affected the creation of secularism, an ideal of the Pahlavis. In the 1960's, the question was not so much how but when foreign interests are overthrown, who would oversee the petrodollars flooding the country? The secularists, the Shah among them, opted for a strong military, modern urban centers, and building of dams to generate hydroelectric energy. The clergy wanted a more equitable sharing of the wealth and power, a better judiciary, a less west-struck society, and most importantly, governance by an assembly of Islamic jurists. To suppress the demands of the clergy and to keep Americans, who would build his "Great Civilization" happy, the Shah resorted to repression. Using the SAVAK, originally created to safeguard against Communist infiltration, he quelled all opposition. By 1963, the division between the secularists and the clerics was palpable.

As mentioned, the Communist Party was renamed the Tudeh Party in 1942. By 1944, it claimed 25,000 members, Participated in the 14th Majles and captured 8 seats and, by 1946 created two pro-Soviet republics in northern Iran, The Independent Republic of Azerbaijan and the Independent Republic of Mahabad. In 1949, however, blamed for an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the Shah, Tudeh was outlawed. SAVAK was assigned to monitor and control its underground activities.

In 1956, the Tudeh was internationalized. Furthermore, because the "White Revolution" had neutralized its main objections to a secular-nationalist Iran, it made common cause with Ayatollah Khomeini to rescue Iran from a total cultural, socio-economic, and technological dependence on the United States. Rather than U.S. interests, Iran was to defend its own interests against both the East and the West.

America's hold on Iran, unlike the British hold, was tenuous. The 1979 hostage taking, a U.S. economic blockade, freezing of Iranian assets, and a meaningless border war with Iraq isolated Iran from the rest of the world. Was it not for the aid extended by Germany, Britain, and Russia, Iran would not have been able to put its house in order.

An Islamic republic since April 1, 1979, Iran is a theocracy. Iran's affairs are administered by a *Faqih* (supreme leader), a president, and a cabinet. The president and the cabinet do not have independent decision-making powers. They answer to the *Faqih* and a group of religious authorities appointed by the *Faqih*. The Iranian constitution codifies Islamic principles of government for a unicameral legislative body, the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Judicial affairs are administered by the Supreme Court.

Iran celebrated the 20th anniversary of its Islamic revolution in 1999. Within this time, there has been a perceptible change of attitude on the part of some governmental officials, especially the President, and certain segments of the population, especially the youth, leading to the hope of recovering some of the gains of the Pahlavi days. The levers of power, however, remain firmly in the hands of the Supreme Ruler, at whose behest the President and the Majlis must act. And he does not seem willing to deviate from the path dictated by his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

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