

Iran in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



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Chapter 1: Country Profile

Introduction

Iran is a non-Arab Muslim state in the Middle East, the only Shi'ite theocracy in the world. A traditional and conservative society, it is governed by an Islamic revolutionary regime. Until 1935 Iran was known as Persia, and according to archeological evidence, humans have inhabited the geographic area of contemporary Iran for over 100,000 years.¹ Its location on the Silk Road and in the center of Eurasia brought the people of Iran into contact with the ideas and people of numerous foreign countries and powerful empires. This influence can be seen today in Iranian culture, which is distinct from the cultures of countries surrounding it. Persian-Farsi, not Arabic, is the main language spoken, and the majority of Iranians follow the Shi'a interpretation of Islam.



© Hamed Saber
Hormoz Island, Persian Gulf

Oil has played a large part in Iran's modern history and in the creation of the Republic. Iran is a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) and its second-largest oil producer, holding 9% of the world's oil reserves.² The country's nuclear program has drawn worldwide concern, as has its support for the terrorist group, Hezbollah. Currently, U.S. trade with Iran is mostly prohibited by the U.S. government due to Iran's status as a state sponsor of terrorism.³

Facts and Figures⁴

Location:

Middle East, bordering the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea, between Iraq and Pakistan.

note: Strategic location on the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, which are vital maritime pathways for crude oil transport.

Area:

total: 1.648 million sq km (636 million sq mi)

land: 1.636 million sq km (631 million sq mi)

water: 12,000 sq km (4,633 sq mi)

Land boundaries:

total: 5,440 km (3,380 mi)

border countries: Afghanistan 936 km (582 mi); Armenia 35 km (22 mi); Azerbaijan-proper 432

¹ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Iran." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>

² Global Security. "Military – Oil." 27 April 2005. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/oil.htm>

³ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Iran." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>

⁴ Figures are from the CIA World Factbook, and are from 2008 unless otherwise noted. "Iran." 15 May 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

km (268 mi); Azerbaijan-Naxçivan exclave 179 km (111 mi); Iraq 1,458 km (906 mi); Pakistan 909 km (565 mi); Turkey 499 km (310 mi); Turkmenistan 992 km (616 mi).

Climate:

The climate of Iran is mostly arid or semiarid; however, it is subtropical along the Caspian coast.

Terrain:

Iran's terrain is rugged and mountainous. Its high central basin has both deserts and mountains, while there are small, discontinuous plains along both coasts.

Natural resources:

Petroleum, natural gas, coal, chromium, copper, iron ore, lead, manganese, zinc, sulfur

Population:

70.5 million. (2007 est.)⁵

Nationality:

noun: Iranian(s)

adjective: Iranian

Demographic distribution:

0–14 years: 22.3% (male 7,548,116/female 7,164,921)

15–64 years: 72.3% (male 24,090,976/female 23,522,861)

65 years and over: 5.4% (male 1,713,533/female 1,834,816)

Population growth rate: 0.792%

Life expectancy at birth:

total population: 70.86 years

male: 69.39 years

female: 72.4 years

Literacy:

definition: age 15 and over can read and write

total population: 77%

male: 83.5%

female: 70.4% (2002 est.)

Ethnic groups:

Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%

Religions:

Muslim 98% (Shi'a 89%, Sunni 9%), other (includes Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i) 2%



© youngrobv / flickr.com
College students in Shustar

⁵ U.S. Department of State "Iran Background Notes: Population." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>

Languages:

Persian and Persian dialects 58%, Turkic and Turkic dialects 26%, Kurdish 9%, Luri 2%, Balochi 1%, Arabic 1%, Turkish 1%, other 2%

Country name:

conventional long form: Islamic Republic of Iran

conventional short form: Iran

local long form: Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran

local short form: Iran

former: Persia



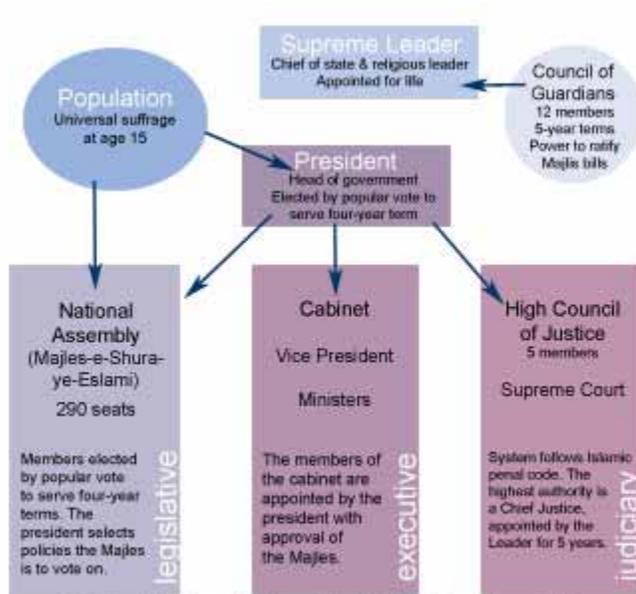
© Eliza Tasbihi
Tabriz City Hall

Government type: theocratic republic

Capital: Tehran

Administrative divisions: 30 provinces (*ostanha*, singular - *ostan*); Ardabil, Azarbayjan-e Gharbi, Azarbayjan-e Sharqi, Bushehr, Chahar Mahall va Bakhtiari, Esfahan, Fars, Gilan, Golestan, Hamadan, Hormozgan, Ilam, Kerman, Kermanshah, Khorasan-e Janubi, Khorasan-e Razavi, Khorasan-e Shemali, Khuzestan, Kohgiluyeh va Buyer Ahmad, Kordestan, Lorestan, Markazi, Mazandaran, Qazvin, Qom, Semnan, Sistan va Baluchestan, Tehran, Yazd, Zanjan

Independence day (national holiday): 1 April 1979 (Islamic Republic of Iran proclaimed)



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Legal system:

The Constitution codifies Islamic principles of government based on Shari'a law.

Executive branch:

Chief of state: Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei (since 4 June 1989)

Heads of government: President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (since 3 August 2005, with 62% of the vote); First Vice President Parviz Davudi (since 11 September 2005)

Legislative branch

Iran's legislative branch is a unicameral Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majles-e-Shura-ye-Eslami*) with 290 seats.

Members are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. Elections were last held 14 March 2008 with a runoff held 25 April 2008 (next to be held in 2012). The results were as follows:

percent of vote - NA; seats by party - conservatives/Islamists 170, reformers 46, independents 71, religious minorities 3.

Judicial branch:

The Supreme Court (*Qeveh Qazaieh*) and the four-member High Council of the Judiciary have a single head and overlapping responsibilities. Together they supervise the enforcement of all laws and establish judicial and legal policies. Lower courts include a special clerical court, a revolutionary court, and a special administrative court.

Diplomatic representation in the U.S.: none

note: Iran has an Interests Section in the Pakistani Embassy at 2209 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20007.

Diplomatic representation from the U.S.: none

note: the American Interests Section is located in the Swiss Embassy compound at Africa Avenue, West Farzan Street, number 59, Tehran, Iran.

GDP - composition by sector:

agriculture: 10.7%

industry: 42.9%

services: 46.4% (2007 est.)

Labor force: 28.7 million

note: shortage of skilled labor (2006 est.)

Labor force - by occupation:

agriculture: 25%

industry: 31%

services: 45% (June 2007)

Unemployment rate: 12% according to the Iranian government (2007 est.)

Population below poverty line: 18% (2007 est.)

Budget:

revenues: \$64 billion

expenditures: \$64 billion (2007 est.)

Public debt: 23.2% of GDP (2007 est.)

Industries:

Petroleum, petrochemicals, fertilizers, caustic soda, textiles, cement and other construction materials, food processing (particularly sugar refining and vegetable oil production), ferrous and non-ferrous metal fabrication, armaments

Agricultural products: wheat, rice, other grains, sugar beets, sugar cane, fruits, nuts, cotton; dairy products, wool, caviar

Exports: Petroleum accounts for 80%; chemical and petrochemical products, fruits and nuts, and carpets comprise the remaining 20%.

Exports - partners:

Japan 14%, China 12.8%, Turkey 7.2%, Italy 6.3%, South Korea 6%, Netherlands 4.6% (2006)

Imports: industrial raw materials and intermediate goods, capital goods, foodstuffs and other consumer goods, technical services

Imports - partners:

Germany 12.2%, China 10.5%, UAE 9.3%, France 5.6%, Italy 5.4%, South Korea 5.4%, Russia 4.4% (2006)

Telephones - main lines in use: 21.981 million (2006)

Telephones - mobile cellular: 13.659 million (2006)

Radio broadcast stations:

AM 72, FM 5, shortwave 5 (1998)

Television broadcast stations:

28 (plus 450 repeaters) (1997)

Internet hosts:

6,111 (2007)

Internet users:

18 million (2006)

Airports: 331 (2007)

with paved runways: 129

with unpaved runways: 202

Railways:

total: 8,367 km

broad gauge: 94 km 1.676-m gauge

standard gauge: 8,273 km 1.435-m gauge (146 km electrified) (2006)

Roadways:

total: 179,388 km

paved: 120,782 km (includes 878 km of expressways)

unpaved: 58,606 km (2003)



© Karl O'Brien
Cell phone users in Shustar

Military branches:

Islamic Republic of Iran Regular Forces (*Artesh*): Ground Forces, Navy, Air Force of the Military of the Islamic Republic of Iran (*Niru-ye Hava'i-ye Artesh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*; includes air defense); Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, IRGC): Ground Forces, Navy, Air Force, Quds Force (special operations), and Basij Force (Popular Mobilization Army); Law Enforcement Forces (2008)

Refugees and internally displaced persons:

refugees (country of origin): 914,268 (Afghanistan); 54,024 (Iraq) (2007)

Chapter 2 Geography

Introduction

Iran is a mountainous country with a predominantly desert environment that is dotted with oases supporting lush vegetation. Until modern transportation routes were established in the 20th century to connect the different regions, human settlements were relatively autonomous. Typically, one larger settlement was the economic nucleus for many smaller outlying hamlets. Rugged mountains and barren deserts kept them isolated and impeded travel to the waters of the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf. In the absence of navigable waterways, caravan traffic traversed the land through mountain passes.⁶

Climate

The climate in Iran reflects the topography of the different regions. In the northwest, winters are cold with heavy precipitation, snow, and freezing rain. The temperature decreases in a southerly direction. Although the average annual rainfall in the country is 40.6 cm (16 in), precipitation levels also decrease from north to south. The Caspian region receives an average of 198 cm (78 in) throughout the year while the southern areas receive considerable rainfall during a three-month rainy season. The Central Plateau, for example, receives very little precipitation, especially during summer months. While southern Iran experiences mild winters, summer is extremely hot and humid. Along the Caspian coastal plain, high humidity prevails throughout the year owing to the low altitude. Humidity there can reach 100% with summer temperatures reaching a high of 37.7°C (100°F). Temperatures below freezing rarely occur along the Caspian Coast.⁷



© Hamed Saber
Harijan, a village in the Alborz Mountains

Topography

Mountains

Iran's landmass is enveloped by mountain ranges. The most significant mountain chain is the Zagros, which runs parallel to Iran's western border with Iraq. Its rugged peaks exceed 3,500 m (12,000 ft) in height, the highest point being Zard Kuh (Yellow Mountain) at 4,548 m (14,921 ft).⁸ The central part of the range is characterized by long, linear ridges and valleys which extend for hundreds of miles.⁹

The mountains found in northern Iran are loosely referred to as the Alborz (Elburz) range. The range itself is due south of the Caspian Sea where its peaks exceed 2,743 m (9,000 ft) in height along the coast. The distance between water and mountain is less than one km (.6 mi) in places, creating a lush plant life that extends up into the northern slopes. The range acts as a climatic barrier between the coast and the internal plateau and southern slopes, which, lacking water, are

⁶ Country Studies. Library of Congress. "Iran - Geography." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/iran/28.htm>

⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293359/Iran>

⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Zurd Kah." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1053869/Zard-Kuh>

⁹ NASA. Earth Observatory. "Salt Dome in the Zagros Mountains, Iran." No date. http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Newsroom/NewImages/images.php3?img_id=17245

barren.¹⁰ Damavand, a dormant volcano rising to 5,670 m (18,602 ft), is the highest elevation in the Alborz and in Iran.¹¹

Central Plateau and Deserts

Central Iran is dominated by several basins which collectively comprise the Central Plateau, a barren region that is largely uninhabited. Two large deserts, the Dashte-e-Kavir (Great Salt Desert) and the Dasht-e-Lut, a rock desert, dominate the area to the northeast and east of the Central Plain. The summer heat of the Dasht-e-Lut combines with low humidity levels to create temperatures believed to be higher than almost anywhere else on Earth.¹² Dashte-e-Kavir poses its own dangers with little rain and quick surface evaporation, which creates quicksand-like salt marshes.¹³



© Bastian / flickr.com
At the edge of the Dasht-e Kavir Desert

Bodies of Water

Lakes

Lake Urmia (Great Salt Lake), a shallow body of water with no outlet, is close to the city of Tabriz in the northwest. One of the largest saline lakes in the world, it supports little aquatic life, other than a species of brine shrimp, owing to the salinity level.¹⁴ The shores of Lake Urmia are devoid of human settlements, yet flamingos, pelicans, and migratory birds can be found here.¹⁵ A 50-km (31 mi) bridge, two decades in the planning, is scheduled for completion in 2008.¹⁶

Rivers

There are no major rivers in Iran that serve as transportation arteries. Only the Karun, which flows into the Shatt al Arab, is navigable by small craft from Khorramshahr to Ahvaz, a distance of 180 km (111 mi). Among the permanent rivers that flow year round, some drain into the Persian Gulf while others, which originate in the Zagros or Alborz Mountains, empty into the Caspian Sea. Within the Central Plateau most rivers are seasonal; the springtime flow is the result of snow melting in the mountains. The rest of the year the river beds lie dry. There are few rivers at all in the eastern part of the country.

¹⁰ SummitPost.Org. "Central Alborz Mountains." 12 April 2008.

<http://www.summitpost.org/area/range/154322/central-alborz-mountains.html>

¹¹ Volcano World. Oregon State University. "Mount Damavand, Iran." 22 March 2005.

<http://volcano.oregonstate.edu/volcanoes/damavand/damavand.html>

¹² Encyclopædia Britannica. "Lut Desert." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/351867/Lut-Desert>

¹³ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Kavir Desert." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/313548/Kavir-Desert>

¹⁴ Saline Systems. Eimanifar, Amin and Feridon Mohebbi. "Urmia Lake (Northwest Iran): A Brief Overview." 16 May 2007. <http://www.salinesystems.org/content/3/1/5>

¹⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Lake Urmia." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/619901/Lake-Urmia>

¹⁶ Skyscraper City. "Urmia Causeway." 2007. <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=401527>

Major Cities

Tehran

Tehran is located in north-central Iran less than 160 km (100 mi) south of the Caspian Sea and nestled in the southern slopes of the Alborz. It is the political, administrative and economic capital of Iran. Regionally, it is second in size only to Cairo, Egypt. Unlike other Middle Eastern capitals, however, Tehran is relatively young. When the Qajars chose Tehran as their capital in the late 18th century, it was a minor town with 15,000 residents on the outskirts of the ancient city of Rey. Tehran's population expanded to 200,000 when the Pahlavi Dynasty was founded in 1925. It grew rapidly thereafter as government administration was centralized and the bureaucracy expanded. It has continued to grow since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979.¹⁷ Ongoing migration from the countryside, as well as a high birth rate, accounts for the increase.¹⁸ Today nearly 14 million people live in Tehran's metropolitan area.¹⁹

Mashhad

Located in the Kashaf River valley 850 km (528 mi) northeast of Tehran, Mashhad is near the border with Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. This close proximity made it the temporary home of Afghani refugees during Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Today, it is home to 2.4 million people. Its name, an Arabic word meaning "place of martyrdom," refers to the 9th century murder of Reza, the 8th Imam of Shi'a Islam. As a result, a pilgrimage (*ziyarah*) to Mashhad is a major lifecycle event for Shi'a Muslims. While a pilgrim on a visit to Mecca is allowed to use the title *hajji* with his name, a pilgrim to Mashhad is referred to as *mashti*.²⁰ Some 20 million pilgrims, including many from neighboring Iraq, visit each year.²¹

Tabriz

Far in the northwest corner of Iran, near the borders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and 750 km (466 mi) from Tehran, lies the city of Tabriz. Once a stop on the legendary Silk Road, it is known for its traditional carpet craft and magnificent mosques (the Jum'a Mosque, the 14th-century Ali Shah Mosque, and the 13th-century Blue Mosque). Tabriz is home to Iran's largest minority, the Azeris, and has a population of 1.4 million people.

Bandar Abbas

Prior to the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), Iran's major port was Khorramshahr, situated at the northern end of the Persian Gulf. During the war, however, the Iraqis occupied Khorramshahr. As a result, Bandar Abbas, a port in southern Iran at the Strait of Hormuz, took its place as the premier



© Sorosh Tavakoli
Bandar Abbas

¹⁷ Mongabay. "Iran – Population." No date.

http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country_studies/iran/GEOGRAPHY.html

¹⁸ UN Cyber School Bus. "Tehran, Iran." No date. <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/habitat/profiles/tehran.asp>

¹⁹ All population information is from the web site City Population. "Iran." 25 October 2006.

<http://www.citypopulation.de/Iran.html>

²⁰ Windows on Asia. "Religion of Iran." No date. <http://asia.msu.edu/centralasia/Iran/religion.html>

²¹ Sacred Sites, Places of Peace and Power. "Mashhad." No date.

http://www.sacredsites.com/middle_east/iran/mashad.htm

Iranian harbor. International cargo ships as well as local fishing boats dock in Bandar Abbas. Similarly, it hosts an Iranian naval base, and ships are built and repaired there. Rail, air, and land routes connect this city of close to 380,000 people with Tehran and the rest of the country.²²

Esfahan

The Safavid monarch Shah Abbas the Great established Esfahan as the Persian capital in the late 16th century. To support the activities associated with a seat of governance, the city expanded around *Naqsh-e Jahan* (Pattern of the World) Square. Now called Imam Square, it is the second largest public square in the world after China's Tiananmen Square. Known for two of the most magnificent mosques in the Muslim world—the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and the Imam Mosque—Esfahan is also famous for its beautiful bridges, which span the Zayandeh Rud River. In particular, the Bridge of Khaju (*Pole-i-Khaju*) with its 23 arches is an architectural wonder. To sum up the city's grandeur, Iranians say "Esfahan is half the world" (*Esfahan nesf-e jahan*), a phrase that rhymes in Persian-Farsi.²³ Esfahan is also a base for some of Iran's major industries, including the manufacture of steel, armaments, medicine, and textiles. Nearly 1.6 million people live in Esfahan.

Shiraz

An ancient city and long-established trading center, Shiraz was the capital of Persia at various times. Today, it is home to 1.2 million people. It is known within Iran as the city of roses and poets, several of whom are buried in the city, and whose mausoleums attract a steady stream of visitors. Outside the country, the name is associated with the red grape from which wine is made. While the grape has been shown to have originated in France, the oldest known sample of wine, dating back 7,000 years, was found in clay jars excavated near Shiraz.²⁴ After the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the Persian wine-making tradition ceased because of Islamic injunctions against alcohol consumption.²⁵ The city's high altitude, 1,600 m (5,249 ft), gives it an extremely moderate climate.²⁶



© Sebastia Giralt
Medieval Persian poet Saadi's tomb, Shiraz

Qom

Founded in the 9th century C.E. and located about 100 km (62 mi) south of Tehran, Qom is considered a holy city by Shi'a Muslims. Since the 1920s, it has become home to numerous theological seminaries, the best known of which is Howzeh-ye Elmieh. Some 60,000 students are enrolled in programs which train them to become *mullahs*, or Islamic clergymen. Students come from all over Iran, as well as from outside the country. Imam Ruholla Khomeini, who founded

²² Iran Chamber Society. "Bandar Abbas." No date.

http://www.iranchamber.com/cities/bandar_abbas/bandar_abbas.php

²³ Earth Policy Institute. Larsen, Janet. "My Journey to Iran." September 2005. <http://www.earth-policy.org/Transcripts/Iran05.htm>

²⁴ Persia Travel Mart. "Shiraz." No date. <http://www.persiatravelmart.com/cities/shiraz/main.html>

²⁵ The Guardian. Tait, Robert. "End of the Vine." 12 October 2005.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/oct/12/worlddispatch.iran>

²⁶ ISTA. "Iran Population." 2007. <http://www.irantour.org/Iran/population.html>

the Islamic Republic, is the most famous among those who studied here.²⁷ In the early 1960s, Imam Ruholla Khomeini agitated against the Shah and then formed his revolutionary government there after his return from exile in 1979. In addition to its religious importance, the city is a regional transportation hub and has almost 960,000 inhabitants.

Natural Disasters

Iran is in a high seismicity zone.²⁸ Geologists believe the landmass was formed by the interaction between the Arabian, Eurasian, and Indian tectonic plates.²⁹ Shifts produce faults in the earth, making the entire country of Iran susceptible to earthquakes. Earthquakes are among the most devastating of natural disasters, since they give no warning. Losses in Iran are typically large, because few buildings meet international building code safety standards.³⁰ A relatively weak earthquake (6.6 on the Richter scale) in 2003 caused 25,000 deaths when it leveled the town of Bam.³¹ Although the government has a disaster relief plan, lack of funding and poor institutional coordination have limited its effectiveness.³²



© Sasan Tavakoli Farsani
Ancient Bam citadel before & after earthquake

Environmental Problems

The most serious environmental problem in Iran is urban air pollution due to vehicle emissions. Health problems, such as eye and throat irritation related to pollution, are on the rise. In 2005, it was reported that 4,600 people die every year from these illnesses.³³ Outside of cities, deforestation, desertification, overgrazing and even government projects are destroying the natural environment and endangering species of wild animals. Some Iranian people feel as though the government is more interested in bringing cash into the country than protecting the environment. Such was the case at Kavir National Park, when two proposed oil projects resulted in the blasting and excavation of much of the landscape. The government does not take a proactive stance, since environmental considerations often add significant cost to development initiatives.³⁴

²⁷ Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Gulf News. Chopra, Anuj. "Restless in Radical Iran." 2 May 2008. <http://www.pulitzercenter.org/openitem.cfm?id=933>

²⁸ Columbia University Earth Institute, Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. "The Ardekul, Iran Earthquake - May 10, 1997." 1 October 1998. <http://www.ldeo.columbia.edu/~mwest/museum/history.html>

²⁹ Global Security. "Iran." <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/accp/is3008/lsn1.htm>

³⁰ Christian Science Monitor. O'Neill, Brendan. "Iran's Quake: Nothing 'Natural' About This Disaster." 2 January 2004. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0102/p11s01-coop.html>

³¹ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293359/Iran>

³² Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Iran Studies Group. "Earthquake Management in Iran." 6 January 2004. http://isg-mit.org/projects-storage/DisasterManagement/Earthquake_Management_Iran_Final.pdf

³³ National Public Radio. "Iran's Pollution Worries Come by Air and Water." 31 January 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7102236>

³⁴ Radio Free Liberty. Sepeshri, Vahid. "Iran: Environmental Takes A Back Seat to Development." 27 August 2007. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/08/7f4e694b-668d-4009-a7c0-015559b320be.html>

Chapter 3 History

Pre-Iranians: Akkadians and Elamites

Archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest human habitation in Iran, historically known to the West as Persia, dates back to 30,000 B.C.E. These people were primarily hunter-gatherers dwelling south of the Caspian Sea and along the northern Persian Gulf. Civilization gained a foothold in the western area between 8000 and 6000 B.C.E.; excavations reveal signs of domestic animals and painted pottery from that period.³⁵

The first pre-Aryan civilization in Iran was that of the Akkadians, whose settlements date back to 4200 B.C.E. It is estimated that Elamites arrived around 3500 B.C.E., and became the dominant civilization early in the second millennium B.C.E. Elam borrowed many cultural achievements—including the cuneiform writing system—from its Sumerian neighbors to the west (the area of present-day Iraq) and later transmitted much of this knowledge to the Median and Achaemenid empires. Between 2000 and 1800 B.C.E., proto-Iranian tribes began to migrate from Central Asia into Iran, completely supplanting the Elamite civilization. By 1200 B.C.E., these tribes, principally the Medes, the Parthians, and the Persians, dominated the land.

The First Iranian Dynasties

The Medes

The Median tribes were the first to establish a Persian kingdom. In 701 B.C.E., they united under the rebel leader, Daia-Oku, to more effectively fight off the Assyrians to the west, and establish the capital at Ecbatana.



© dynamosquito / flickr.com
Sculpture of Median priests, Persepolis

A century later, King Cyaxares (635–595 B.C.E.) would change the course of Median history. A military strategist, Cyaxares reorganized the Median military and established diplomatic relations with former enemies, the Scythians and the Babylonians. With their support, the Medians overthrew the powerful Assyrian Empire, destroying its capital, Nineveh, in 612 B.C.E. The Medes were known as the best horse breeders of their time, and they also built the strongest and fastest chariots of that period. During this campaign, Cyaxares used chariots that carried slashing scythes on their wheels; this would become the base of legend a hundred years later. Within a few years, the Medians ruled over much of Iran, Assyria, and northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Cappadocia.

With subsequent Median leaders, corruption at court was rampant, leading to uprisings across the kingdom. The Achaemenids of central Iran, who were subject to the Medes, benefitted from the popular discontent. When the Achaemenid king, Cyrus the Great, rode into Ecbatana in 559 B.C.E. and overthrew King Astyages, the Medes welcomed their new ruler. After defeating the Medes, Cyrus took control of Lydia and Babylon with little resistance.

³⁵ Iranologie.com. Rezakhani, Khodadad. “History of Iran Chapter I: Iran before the Iranians.” 2002. <http://www.iranologie.com/history/history1.html>

The Achaemenids

Under Cyrus the Great, the Achaemenian Persian Empire developed into the greatest empire the world had seen up to that point.³⁶ Of all the pre-Islamic empires of the Middle East, it may also have been the most humane and liberal. Cyrus, a shrewd politician, modeled himself as the “savior” of conquered nations. He set in place policies of religious freedom, and restored temples and other infrastructure in the cities he acquired. The most famous of these gestures is the “Cyrus Cylinder” given to Babylon shortly after he took control. The clay scroll is thought by some to be the world’s first chart of human rights.³⁷ A replica of the declaration is kept at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City, between the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council chambers.³⁸

Cyrus—and then his son, Darius—led the Achaemenian Persians across the Middle East and Asia Minor. By the time of Darius’ death in 486 B.C.E., the Persians had more than 20 nations under its control: all the land from Egypt, present-day Turkey, and parts of Greece in the west, to the Hindu Kush in the east, north to the edges of Europe, and south to the Arabian Sea.

Zoroastrianism

The spread of the Zoroastrian religion in the region began with one of the most historically famous of the early Median tribes, the Magis. In their position as the hereditary priests, they played an important role in its acceptance. The Achaemenids clearly favored Zoroastrianism as a religion. Its holy scriptures, the Avesta, contain the Gathas, a set of 16 moral and spiritual guidelines set in verse.³⁹ Its monotheistic character set it apart at a time when surrounding civilizations—the Babylonian, Egyptian, and Assyrian, to name a few—worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses. Zoroastrianism became one of the defining elements of Persian culture at that time. With it came new ideas, such as free will. The Achaemenid emphasis on truth and justice, based in the Zoroastrian religion, made them credible leaders in the eyes of the many nations they ruled.



© Nick Taylor
Zoroastrian Towers of Silence, Yazd

Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, and the Parthians

After Darius, the Persian Empire fell victim to corruption. A century and a half after the death of Darius I, Darius III assumed control in 336 B.C.E., but reigned only six years: he was defeated by Alexander the Great, an ancient king of Macedon, who went on to conquer the entire Persian Empire. Darius, meanwhile, was murdered by one of his own subjects.⁴⁰ Following Alexander’s death in Babylon in 323 B.C.E., there was no clear successor to his throne. In an uneasy solution,

³⁶ Iranologie.com. Rezakhani, Khodadad. “History of Iran Chapter IV: Achaemenid Empire.” 2002. <http://www.iranologie.com/history/history4.html>

³⁷ Iran Chamber Society, *History of Iran*. Suren-Pahlav. “Cyrus Charter of Human Rights.” No date. http://www.iranchamber.com/history/cyrus/cyrus_charter.php

³⁸ Iranian Archives 1995–2007, *The Iranian*. “U.N. Chief Awarded Cyrus Cylinder.” 21 April 1998. <http://www.iranian.com/Features/April98/UN/>

³⁹ BBC. “Zoroaster’s vision.” 20 July 2006. http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/history/zoroaster_1.shtml

⁴⁰ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. “The Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 B.C.” 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/csttyd:@field\(DOCID+ir0014\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/csttyd:@field(DOCID+ir0014))

Alexander's generals divided the Persian territories (satrapies) they had conquered among themselves. Very soon, war broke out among these "successors." Within 18 years, the Macedonian general Seleucus Nicator, with the assistance of Ptolemy I of Egypt, brought the whole eastern part of Alexander's empire, as far as the Indus River and westward to Syria and Anatolia,⁴¹ under his authority.

The dynasty Nicator established was further legitimized through marriage with the Persian royal line that descended from Darius I. However, the Seleucid's defeat by the Romans in 190 B.C.E. saw the start of a decline they could not halt. The Seleucids began to lose control over large territories, and the empire rapidly disintegrated. The Parthians, a satrapy from the Caspian Sea area, achieved independence from the weakened Seleucids. Over the next 50 years, through the conquests of Mithradates I and Artabanus II,⁴² and by choking off the Silk Road trade routes to China, the Parthians were able to seize a huge chunk of the former Persian Empire, including present-day northeastern Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and western Afghanistan.

Excellent horsemen, the "Parthian shot" would become historically famous; this was a military tactic in which a rider, pretending to retreat, would turn his body backwards and, gripping the galloping horse only with his legs, fire arrows at his pursuers.⁴³ The Parthians held sway until war broke out with the Romans in 92 B.C.E. The two empires fought into the third century C.E., but neither side emerged triumphant.

The Sassanid Era



© Aliieh Saadatpour
Sassanid sculpture, Kermanshah

Ardashir, who founded the Sassanid Empire, defeated the exhausted Parthians in 224 C.E., and ruled until 241 C.E. His son, Shapur, took over and expanded the empire to cover all of present-day Iran, Iraq, the Gulf Coast of the Arabian Peninsula, western Pakistan and Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia. Zoroastrianism was now the official state religion, but it had long ago ceased to serve the needs of common people. Instead, it favored the priestly elite. Thus,

when Islam arrived in the 7th century, the Persians welcomed the new religion because it promised equality and justice, and offered relief from the corruption that characterized the end of the Zoroastrian era.

Under the Sassanids, the Persian Empire enjoyed a renaissance. Persian cities became centers of science, scholarship, art, and commerce. The period beginning with the ascent of Shapur II as Emperor in 325 C.E., and ending with the death of Emperor Anushirvan the Just in 579 C.E., is considered the Golden Age of the Sassanid dynasty. Anushirvan is the most celebrated of the Sassanid rulers. During his reign, a period of intellectual growth resulted in scholarship and scientific research. The first university in Iran was founded and built in Gondishapur. In addition,

⁴¹ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Seleucid Kingdom." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/533278/Seleucid-kingdom#>

⁴² Encyclopædia Britannica. "Parthia." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/444876/Parthia#>

⁴³ Iran Chamber Society. *History of Iran*. Shahbazi, Professor A. Sh. "Parthian Army." No date.

http://www.iranchamber.com/history/parthians/parthian_army.php

Anushirvan expanded transportation networks, reformed the tax system,⁴⁴ centralized power in the government, and constructed new towns and buildings, such as the great palace of Ctesiphon.⁴⁵

The Muslim Conquest

In 642 C.E., the Muslim Arab armies entered Persia under the leadership of Abu Bakr, the first caliph,⁴⁶ or secular successor to the Prophet Muhammad, who had died 10 years earlier.⁴⁷ By the mid 650s, the Arabs defeated the Sassanians, who were weakened by internal corruption and exhausted by centuries of war with the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Islam would fundamentally alter the course of Persian history. Although the majority of Persians converted to Islam, Persia did not become Arabized in contrast to the ancient civilizations of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. If anything, the opposite is true: it was the conquering Arabs who borrowed much from Persian culture.⁴⁸

Islam: The Early Centuries

The first four successors to the Prophet Muhammad, and heads of the Islamic community, were Abu Bakr (632–634 C.E.), Umar (634–644 C.E.), Uthman (644–656 C.E.), and Ali (656–661 C.E.). They were known collectively as the Rashidun, or "Rightly-Guided" caliphs (*al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun*). They were closely related to the Prophet Muhammad either through blood or through marriage and established the Umayyad dynasty.

During the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali, events occurred that would profoundly affect the history of Persia (Iran). A dispute arose between Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and General Mu'awiyah Ibn Abi Sufyan, a relative of the deceased caliph Uthman, over who should be the rightful heir to the caliphate after Uthman. Mu'awiyah fought against Ali, seized Egypt, and assumed the caliphate after Ali's assassination in Kufa (present-day Iraq) in 661 C.E. The dispute continued after Mu'awiyah died 20 years later, leaving the caliphate to his son, Yazid. Ali's son, Husayn, along with his followers, challenged Yazid's authority. Yazid sent an army of 4,000 to meet the unsuspecting Husayn and his retinue of family and 75 fighting men in Karbala.⁴⁹ In the battle, Husayn and all his "Shi'a" (*shiat Ali*, "the party of Ali") followers were killed. As this event occurred at Karbala on 20 Muharram (10 October) in the year 680 C.E., this day became sacred for Shiites everywhere. These events are commemorated annually with dramatic reenactments, in which Shi'a commit self-mutilation to shed their own blood in remembrance of Husayn.

⁴⁴ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. "The Sassanids, A.D. 224–642." 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/irtoc.html>

⁴⁵ Iranologie.com. Rezakhani, Khodadad. "History of Iran Chapter V: Sasanians." 2002. <http://www.iranologie.com/history/history5.html>

⁴⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Rashidun." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9062732/Rashidun>

⁴⁷ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. "Islamic Conquest." 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/irtoc.html>

⁴⁸ University of Wisconsin, Persian History. Lewis, Bernard. "A Short History of the Iranians." 2001. <http://imp.lss.wisc.edu/~aoliai/historypage/ashorthistoryoftheiranians.htm>

⁴⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Battle of Karbalā." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9044710/Battle-of-Karbala>

The Abbasid Dynasty

From 718 to 747 C.E., an anti-Umayyad revolutionary movement developed, promulgated by the Abbasid family, descendants of al-Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet Muhammed. The revolt that developed culminated in a battle in 750 C.E., in which the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II, was overthrown. The Abbasids moved the capital of the caliphate to Baghdad and reigned for 500 years, during which time Persia became solidly Muslim and increasingly Shi'a. More importantly, the many member nations of the empire became more culturally and politically independent, emphasizing their membership in a community of Islamic belief rather than Arab nationality.⁵⁰

Persian Influence and the Seljuk Empire

From 945 C.E. to 1055, the Buwayhids, Persian revivalists with a Shi'a base, ruled Baghdad and most of Iraq as a confederation within the disintegrating Abbasid Empire. They represented a return to native rule for a century until Baghdad fell to the Seljuk Turks in 1055. The Seljuks acted as patrons of the Persian culture and language, and they played an important role in the development of a Turko-Persian tradition. However, as Sunni Muslims, they weakened Shi'a influence for a time. The central political authority now resided in the sultan, and the caliph became nothing more than a religious figurehead. The Seljuks, who controlled a vast territory from Anatolia to Punjab, lasted just over a hundred years.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Seljuk architecture in Karaghan

The Mongol Invasions

Beginning in 1219, the army of Ghengis Khan descended on the area of today's northern Iran in the first of two brutal Mongol invasions, the purpose of which was to loot and strike terror. The destruction was systematic: thousands of cities, towns, and villages were razed, their citizens beheaded or enslaved. In the second Mongol invasion of 1258, Baghdad was burned to the ground by Ghengis Khan's grandson, Hülegü Khan. In what was typical of the Mongols, Hülegü had Al-Musta'sim, the last Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, executed. His head was placed atop a pyramid of skulls made up of Baghdad's scholars, religious leaders, and poets.⁵¹

There was a brief period of quiet after Hülegü's death in 1265. Then, in 1383, Mongols under the command of Tamerlane, a warlord from present-day Uzbekistan, entered the kingdom by the same route as Genghis Khan. (Tamerlane comes from *Timur Lenk*, "Timur the Lame," a title of contempt used by the Persians.) Tamerlane leveled Shiraz and Esfahan, where he massacred 70,000 people and constructed towers of their skulls.^{52,53} Herat, Fars, the area of present-day Iraq,

⁵⁰ Washington State University. *World Civilizations; Islam*. Hooker, Richard. "The Abassid Dynasty." 1996. <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/ISLAM/ABASSID.HTM>

⁵¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iraq*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. "The Mongol Invasion." 1988. <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/17.htm>

⁵² Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. "Invasions of the Mongols and Tamerlane." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/iran/10.htm>

⁵³ "Tamerlane," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2008. <http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997–2008 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761563423/tamerlane.html

Azerbaijan, Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Georgia all fell over the next ten years. The barbarity of the bloody Mongol invasions remains in the collective psyche of the Iranians to this day.

The Safavid Dynasty (1501–1722)

In the early 1500s, after centuries of Arab occupation, Iran was united under the rule of the Safavid dynasty, the greatest dynasty to emerge from the region in the Islamic period (and the first native dynasty to rule the kingdom in 800 years).⁵⁴ The Safavids descended from a long line of Sufi sheikhs, who maintained their headquarters in northwestern Iran and drew their name from Sheikh Safi-al-Din of Ardabil (1252–1334).

They were patrons of the arts and culture. In architecture, the Safavids built mosques, mausoleums, and palace complexes, and restored major shrines. The most celebrated of the Safavid rulers, and the greatest patron of the arts, was Shah Abbas I (1571–1629).

The First Shi'a Regime

Shah Abbas the Great (1587–1629) restored Persia to the status of a great power during his reign by defeating the Turks in 1603, retaking Baghdad. He expelled the Portuguese from the Persian Gulf area, setting up an efficient administration, and patronized the sciences and arts. As Shah of all Iran,⁵⁵ he established the first Shi'a Islamic state, and made Esfahan the capital of the Safavid dynasty. His military and political reforms unified the Iranian Plateau and stabilized the country.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Shah Abbas I., Persian painting

Shah Abbas encouraged contact and trade with Europe, especially through the British East India Company, and developed foreign relationships with the Ottoman Empire and Russia. He transformed Esfahan, located along major trade routes in the center of Iran, into one of the most magnificent cities in Persia. The city's parks, libraries, and mosques amazed Europeans. The presence of Western envoys at the Safavid court, and the large number of Western merchants travelling to Persia, would later have a great influence on arts and literature in Europe. The Safavid dynasty came to an end in 1722, when Esfahan was captured by Mahmoud Khan, an Afghan warlord.⁵⁶

Nadir Shah and Iranian Civil War

The Afghans tried to reimpose Sunni Islam on the Iranian Shi'a, but they were unable to hold onto control of Iran. A tribal warlord, Nadir Quil Beg, restored the monarchy and campaigned into Mesopotamia and north into central Asia. He ultimately took the throne and with it the title Nadir Shah, but he grew increasingly brutal, and his own commanders killed him in 1747. The Zand tribe established themselves at Shiraz a few years later. They held control of Iran for a brief period before a civil war broke out between the Zand and the Qajar factions that would last nearly half a century.

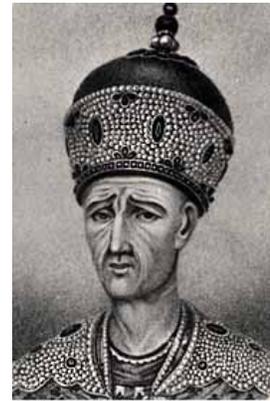
⁵⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ismāil I." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9042930/Ismail-I>

⁵⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. "The Safavids, 1501–1722." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/iran/11.htm>

⁵⁶ PersianIran.com. "Safavid Dynasty 1501–1722." No date. <http://persepolis.free.fr/iran/history/safavid.html>

The Qajar Dynasty (1796–1925): Conquest and Defeat

During the remainder of the 18th century, Iran endured internal strife and wars with neighbors. By 1795, Agha Muhammed Khan, a leader of the Turkic Qajars from Northern Iraq, had hunted down the last of the Zand dynasty. He is remembered for his military genius, but also for his cruelty and ferocity, born out of his capture, castration, and imprisonment by the Zands as a boy. Agha Muhammed declared himself Shah in 1796 and moved the capital to Tehran, then a village near the ruins of the ancient city of Rey. During his short reign, he halted anarchy, united the kingdom for the first time since the Safavids, reasserted control over areas of the Caucasus and Georgia, and conquered new territories, including Azerbaijan. He was assassinated by his own bodyguards in 1797.⁵⁷



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Muhammed Khan

The 19th century saw Iran caught in the midst of diplomatic rivalry between Russia and Britain. Russia sought a "warm water port" in the Persian Gulf, while Britain sought to protect its trade routes to India. Under the rule of Fath-Ali Shah (1798–1834), Iran lost ground to both sides.⁵⁸ Following two disastrous wars with Russia, Iran lost the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and gave up the right to maintain any naval forces in the Caspian Sea according to the treaties of Golestan in 1813 and Turkmanchai in 1828.⁵⁹ In the meantime, Great Britain gained economic and political influence in Iran. The military defeats and the general perception of government corruption led to widespread dissatisfaction among Iranians.

Introduction to the World Economy

Western influence brought with it new ideas in terms of science, technology, systems of law, and economics. Naser o-Din Shah ascended to the throne in 1848. Under the influence of Mirza Taqi Khan (better known as Amir Kabir), Iran's first prime minister,⁶⁰ he implemented reforms aimed at modernizing the state. This included establishing Iran's first modern university, Dar ol-Fonoon, and introducing modern postal and banking systems. In 1856, after the Shah's failed attempt to regain control of Herat, Britain forced Iran to recognize the kingdom of Afghanistan. Under British pressure, the Shah opened the country to foreign trade and investment.

Integration into a world economy, however, led to an undermining of Iran's traditional handicraft industry, forcing carpet weavers to become casual laborers often earning no more than a pittance. In addition, a drop in the international price of silver weakened Iran's currency.⁶¹ In 1891, Naser o-Din Shah decided to grant a European concern monopoly rights over the cultivation and sale of tobacco. By then a popular commodity among Persians, this decision elicited protests from

⁵⁷ The International Qajar Studies Association. *The Qajar Dynasty Pages*. "Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, Founder and First Shah of the Qajar Dynasty." January 2008. <http://www.qajarpages.org/aghahammad.html>; The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. Copyright © 2007 Columbia University Press. "Aga Muhammad Khan." 2001–07. <http://www.bartleby.com/65/ag/AgaMuham.html>

⁵⁸ Iran Chamber Society. *History of Iran*. "Qajar Dynasty." No date. <http://www.iranchamber.com/history/qajar/qajar.php>

⁵⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Āghā Mohammad Khān." 2008. <http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9004031/Agha-Mohammad-Khan>

⁶⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica. "Mīrzā Taqī Khān." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/583225/Mirza-Taqi-Khan#>

⁶¹ *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, 2nd Ed.* Keddie, Nikki. "Chapter Four: Protest and Revolution, 1890–1914 [p. 263]." 2003. New Haven: Yale University Press.

bazaaris (merchants) who mobilized the *ulama*, the powerful class of religious elite, to join their cause. The national boycott forced the Shah to rescind the tobacco monopoly, an action that only encouraged further challenges to his authority. These events are seen by many as the origin of modern Iranian nationalism.⁶² Naser o-Din Shah was assassinated in 1896.⁶³

The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1907

Iranians had come to associate monarchical rule with foreign economic domination and arbitrary rule. This association became more pronounced during the reign of Naser o-Din Shah's successor, his son, Mozaffar. Ignoring his country's economic plight, Mozaffar made expensive trips to Europe and trade concessions to foreign interests from which he personally profited. This and the perception of general corruption drove Iranians to demand a constitutional form of governance limiting his powers.⁶⁴ The change was supported by the *ulama*, who provided religious legitimacy for opposing rule by monarchy. In this way, Iran's experience was very different from Europe's, where political reform was a secular undertaking aimed at rupturing the alliance between church and state.⁶⁵



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Mozaffar-o-Din Shah

The Anglo-Russian Convention

The desire for an accountable government led to the creation of Iran's—and the Middle East's—first constitution, drawn up by an elected parliament in 1906. A supplement provided many of the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Bill of Rights: freedom of press, speech, and association. The constitution, however, never lived up to its promise: the Shah died five days after it was enacted and his son, Mohammad Ali Shah, disregarded it and abolished parliament as well. In 1907, Britain and Russia signed the Anglo-Russian Agreement,⁶⁶ which divided Iran into two spheres of influence: the north for Russia, and the south and east for Britain. The Shah was ultimately deposed in 1909 by pro-constitutional forces who opposed foreign interference in their country. His 11-year old son, Ahmad, the last of the Qajar dynasty, succeeded him. Three years later, Iran was pulled into the power struggle of World War I.

⁶² *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 4, No. 3. Apr. 1962. Keddie, Nikki R. "Religion and Irreligion in Early Iranian Nationalism [pp. 265–295]." Cambridge University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/177523>

⁶³ *Iran and America: Rekindling a Lost Love*. Badiozamani, Badi. "Chapter Seven: Modern Age, Imperialism, Awakening [p. 195]." 2005. East-West Understanding Pr.

http://books.google.com/books?id=NK6_hIN8SOwC&pg=PA195&lpg=PA195&dq=Naser+o-Din+corrupt&source=web&ots=5J_gQiOwR&sig=01siziuvfsKT7Cd9gKVS8RaYO8k&hl=en

⁶⁴ Iran Chamber Society. History of Iran. "Constitutional Revolution." 29 July 2008.

http://www.iranchamber.com/history/constitutional_revolution/constitutional_revolution.php

⁶⁵ *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty*. Gheissari, Ali and Vali Nasr. "Chapter One: Democracy or State-Building, 1906-1941 [p. 27]." 2006. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁶⁶ The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. *The Anglo-Russian Entente—1907*. "Agreement Concerning Persian." 1996–2007. <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/angrusen.htm>

The Pahlavi Dynasty

The First Shah

The occupation of Iran by Russian, British, and Ottoman forces during World War I dealt the final blow from which the government of young Ahmad Shah never recovered. In a coup d'état in February 1921, military officer Reza Pahlavi took control of the government. Aiming to revitalize Iran and free it from control by foreign powers, he was named Minister of Defense, then Prime Minister. Following parliament's deposition of the Qajar dynasty in 1925, he became Shah of Iran. In contrast to the Constitutional Revolution's democratic nationalism, the Pahlavi dynasty based its rule on authoritarian nationalism.⁶⁷



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Reza Shah Pahlavi

The new Shah initiated a broad program of modernization, economic development, and centralization of authority. Reza Shah Pahlavi established secular primary and secondary schools around the country, as well as a modern university in Tehran. Under his regime, girls and women were encouraged to get an education and pursue professional careers. He promoted the expansion of roads and railroads, established industries, and did his best to break the religious monopoly over the justice system and the civil code. As he enacted all these progressive measures and brooked no opposition, he made many enemies. He jailed or killed those who disagreed with him. During World War II, the Soviet Union and Great Britain, fearing that the Shah would cooperate with Nazi Germany to counter their own influence in Iran, occupied Iran and forced Reza Shah's abdication into exile on 16 January 1941.

The Last Shah

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the son of Reza Shah Pahlavi, assumed the throne in 1941. The 1940s were a time of upheaval in Iran as various political, ethnic, and regional forces pressed their interests after the ban on political parties was lifted. In 1951, a struggle for control of the Iranian government developed between the Shah and Mohammad Mossaddeq, an Iranian nationalist. Mossaddeq, who had taken part in the Constitutional Revolution, was chosen by the democratically elected *Majlis* (parliament) to serve as Prime Minister. His popularity, based in part on Iranian sentiment for nationalization of the vast British Petroleum oil interests in Iran, enabled him to expand his authority and render the Shah a ceremonial head of state.

In the meantime, the U.S. had established a military advisory and technical assistance program in Iran in 1950. A bilateral defense agreement would be reached later, in 1959. Iranian officers began training in the U.S., and this would continue for the next 30 years, until the Islamic Revolution.

A Failed Attempt to Nationalize Oil

Mohammad Mossaddeq wanted to industrialize Iran with proceeds from oil sales. However, Britain and the United States opposed the principle of oil nationalization.⁶⁸ The Anglo-Iranian

⁶⁷ The Nation. Afary, Janet and Kevin Anderson. "The Iranian Impasse." 27 June 2007. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070716/afary/2>

Oil Company (AIOC) had done early extraction work, and the British government garnered more revenue from taxing that concessionaire than the Iranian government netted from royalties.⁶⁹ Nationalization was a way around this problem, from Tehran's perspective.⁷⁰ Under Mossadeq's leadership, the *Majlis* nationalized the oil industry. This move predictably antagonized the British who, in turn, froze Iranian assets and led a world-wide boycott of Iranian oil. The Iranian economy suffered when oil production came to a virtual stand-still after the expatriate technicians were withdrawn.

The White Revolution

Mossadeq was overthrown in 1953 with assistance from the CIA,⁷¹ and Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi once again took office. Once again, the Pahlavi family was firmly in control, and once again, economic and social reforms were instituted. In 1963, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi redistributed agricultural land from large feudal landowners to sharecropping farmers, gave women the right to vote, established more schools, and furthered secularization in what is known as the "White Revolution" (so-called because it was bloodless).⁷² To effect these changes the Shah banned political parties and tolerated no opposition. In short, "democracy and development came to be viewed as mutually exclusive, and the former would have to be kept at bay as state-building proceeded."⁷³



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Mohammad Mossadeq

The clerical establishment, in particular, firmly opposed these changes, most vehemently the enfranchisement of women and land reform, which was carried out in a way that increased the commercialization of farming.⁷⁴ After the death of the Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi in 1961, the Shah declined to name a replacement as part of his secularization agenda.⁷⁵ This opened the field to a successor and little-known cleric, Ruholla Musavi Khomeini.

⁶⁸ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Profile: Iran. May 2008.

<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf>

⁶⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. Helen Chapin Metz, Ed. "Mossadeq and Oil Nationalization." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/iran/17.htm>

⁷⁰ San Jose State University, Department of Economics. Watkins, Thayer. "Mohammed Mossadeq, the Nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and the Attempted Overthrow of the Shah." No date. <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/mossadeq.htm>

⁷¹ National Security Archive. "Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran." 22 June 2004. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/index.htm>

⁷² Time. "The White Revolution." c.11 February 1966. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,842491,00.html>

⁷³ *Democracy in Iran: History and Quest for Liberty*. Gheissari, Ali and Vali Nasr. "Chapter Two: The Triumph of the State, 1941–1979. [p. 55]." 2006. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁷⁴ Mount Holyoke College. Gabriel, Satya. "Class Analysis of the Iranian Revolution of 1979." 2001. <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/sgabriel/iran.htm>

⁷⁵ *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East*. Ansari, Ali. "Chapter Two: 1953 [p. 49]." 2006. New York: Basic Books.

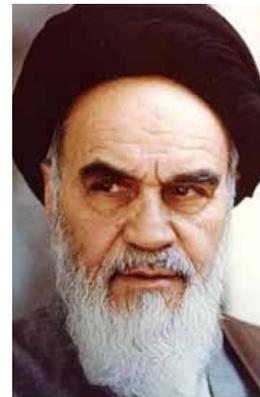
http://books.google.com/books?id=fvRObgMdsYYC&pg=PA49&lpg=PA49&dq=white+revolution+iran&source=web&ots=x13UpwzVkM&sig=bouitlKN-XBvr1_rZ4saha3_cwI&hl=en#PPA49,M1

The Rise of Ayatollah Khomeini

In the 1960s, the authoritarian rule of the Shah provoked political discontent. A religious leader from Qom, Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, developed a following with his antigovernmental speeches. In 1963, he was arrested for speaking out against the Shah's reduction of religious estates in his land-reform program, and against the emancipation of women. Riots ensued, and when he was released a year later, he was sent into exile.⁷⁶ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Khomeini continued to lash out against the Shah from Iraq, and later from France. Audio cassettes of his sermons were distributed via Iran's one national network—mosques—enabling him to develop and maintain a large following despite his extended exile.

Discontent with the Shah's rule grew over time. The plots farmers had received through the Shah's land reform program were often too small to support a household. Many farmers abandoned the land and headed to the cities, especially Tehran. Yet, most only found work at subsistence wages, while oil wealth enabled those close to the royal family to live opulently.

At this time, roughly one third of the government's budget was allocated to military and security-related expenditures.⁷⁷ Mohammed Reza Shah's feared undercover security force, SAVAK, had the authority to arrest and detain suspected persons indefinitely.⁷⁸ Moreover, by 1978 the total number of men in uniform was 413,000, up from 171,000 in 1971.⁷⁹ Yet all of these security forces were unable to defend his government in the face of a mass-based social movement.⁸⁰ Rioting and turmoil in Iran's major cities brought down the government. On 16 January 1979, the Shah left the country, and Khomeini assumed control.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Ayatollah Khomeini

Establishment of the Islamic Republic

Khomeini, who had refused to return while the Shah remained in power, was met by an enthusiastic crowd of more than one million upon his arrival in Tehran on 1 February 1979.⁸¹ Four days later, he appointed a fellow returnee, Mehdi Bazargan, as Prime Minister of the provisional government. Recognized by both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., Bazargan was to govern until an election could be held. On 1 April, following overwhelming support in a national referendum, Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic republic.

⁷⁶ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Iran." May 2008. <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf>

⁷⁷ *The Rentier State*. Beblawi, Hazem and Giacomo Luciani, eds. Najambadi, Afsaneh. "Chapter Ten: Depolitisation of a Rentier State: The Case of Pahlavi Iran [p. 211]." 1987. New York Routledge.

http://books.google.com/books?id=PIo9AAAAIAAJ&dq=rentier+state+iran&source=gbs_summary_s&cad=0

⁷⁸ Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program. "Ministry of Security SAVAK." 16 January 2000. <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/iran/savak/index.html>

⁷⁹ National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies. Roberts, Mark. "Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military." January 1996. <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair48/mcnair48.pdf>

⁸⁰ *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*. Skocpol, Theda. "Chapter Ten: Rentier State and Shia Islam in the Iranian Revolution [p. 240]." New York: Cambridge University Press. 1994. http://books.google.com/books?id=1E-sb3d-DegC&pg=PA240&lpg=PA240&dq=iran+rentier+state&source=web&ots=Fm_LlyFJSI&sig=He9-NdpoVm_XQFyHi6mfpkH_PQ0&hl=en#PPA242,M1

⁸¹ Harvard Law School, Islamic Studies Legal Program. Buchta, Wilfried. "Taking Stock of a Quarter Century of the Islamic Republic of Iran." June 2005. <http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/ilsp/publications/buchta.pdf>

Bazargan, an engineer by training who had been jailed by the Shah, was a political liberal who had been affiliated with moderate/nationalist groups while in exile in France. Rather than revamping international norms along ideological lines, he worked to assert Iran's sovereign rights without provoking the Western world. This was not what Khomeini and the clerical establishment had in mind, however. The need to unseat Bazargan quickly became apparent.

Break in Diplomatic Ties

U.S. military assistance to Iran between 1947 and 1969 had exceeded \$1.4 billion. After 1969, Iran assumed its own military costs with revenues from its growing oil exports. In 1978, with 1,500 U.S. defense personnel and 45,000 military and civilian technicians and their dependents living in Iran, the U.S. military mission in Iran was the largest in the world. Almost all of them were evacuated by early 1979.⁸² Anti-Western sentiment eventually manifested itself in the November 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy by a radical group of Iranian students demanding the extradition of the Shah, who at that time was undergoing medical treatment in the U.S. This incident led to the collapse of the provisional government and a decisive break in U.S.-Iranian relations.⁸³ Bazargan proved unable to secure the release of some 53 U.S. diplomats who were being held hostage and resigned. The hostages remained captive for the next 14 months.⁸⁴



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Mehdi Bazargan

Intimidation and Repression

Through the Revolutionary Guards—then an informal religious militia formed by Khomeini to prevent any attempts at a coup—Khomeini suppressed leftist elements within the government while pushing the idea of a revolutionary Islam. This was the beginning of a period of execution and assassination aimed at intimidating political groups not under control of the ruling Revolutionary Council and its sister Islamic Republican Party.

Between 1979 and 1982, Iran experienced the Islamicization of the justice system, schools, and universities; the nationalization of most of the economy; the establishment of a foreign policy that was hostile to the U.S. and was aimed at exporting the revolution; the enforcement of the Islamic dress code for women; the revocation of freedom of the press, and freedom to form political parties; and much more.

A New Constitution

The tenure of the Republic's first president, Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, an Islamic moderate like Bazargan, lasted a little over a year. Confirmed into office in early 1980, he opposed holding the hostages, and like Bazargan, he was steadily forced from power by conservatives within the government who questioned his revolutionary zeal.

⁸² Global Security.org. Military: Introduction. 19 February 2006.

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/intro.htm>

⁸³ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Iran." May 2008.

<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf>

⁸⁴ Jimmy Carter Library & Museum. "The Hostage Crisis in Iran." 09 February 2006.

<http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/hostages.phtml>

The system of government that emerged after Abolhasan Bani-Sadr left office consisted of a supreme leader (*Valiye Faqih*), a position filled by Khomeini himself. He held the power to nullify election results and select the heads of the armed forces, the judiciary, and the Revolutionary Guards who answered to him. The public, however, could not be completely excluded from the affairs of state. As a result, the president (eligible to serve two terms), members of parliament, and local councils were to be chosen through elections. This did not reduce the power of the religious establishment, however. The Council of Guardians (*Shuraye Negahban*), made up of clerics, was empowered to screen all candidates for public office, as well as legislation proposed in parliament to ascertain compliance with Islamic dictates.⁸⁵ To strengthen their political legitimacy, domestic political disputes and foreign policy pronouncements were increasingly framed in religious terms.⁸⁶

Operation Eagle Claw

President Carter sought a diplomatic solution to the hostage crisis, but Khomeini wanted to use the hostage issue as an embarrassment to the Carter administration. As a second solution, on 24 April 1980, the U.S. military attempted to rescue the embassy hostages in Operation Eagle Claw. The mission had to be aborted after eight American soldiers lost their lives. The hostages were scattered across Iran to make a second rescue attempt impossible. On 19 January 1981, the hostage crisis ended with the signing of the Algiers Accords. The hostages were released into U.S. custody the following day, minutes after the new American president, Ronald Reagan, was sworn in.^{87, 88}



DoD photo
Operation Eagle Claw

The Iran-Iraq War

The Early Years

In April 1980, the Iranian-supported Iraqi Shi'a group, *Ad Dawah*, attempted to assassinate Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz. Iraq feared a Shi'a insurgency among its long-suppressed Shi'a majority (influenced by Iran's Islamic revolution). The assassination attempt, along with other provocations and longstanding regional rivalry, helped to ignite the Iran-Iraq War. In September of the same year, Iraq's Saddam Hussein attacked Iran.⁸⁹ At issue was control of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, which serves as the border between the two countries.⁹⁰ Iraq had reneged on a 1975 agreement, and its superior military forces initially enabled it to take control of the waterway. Although the Iranians lacked spare parts for their mostly American-made

⁸⁵ World Policy Journal. Takeyh, Ray. "Iran's Emerging National Compact." 2002. <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/articles/wpj02-3/takeyh.html>

⁸⁶ New York Times. "The World: The Angry Decade of the Ayatollah." 11 June 1989. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE7D9173BF932A25755C0A96F948260>

⁸⁷ Global Security. "Operation Eagle Claw: A Catalyst for Change in the American Military." Holzworth, Major C.E., USMC. 1997. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1997/Holzworth.htm>

⁸⁸ *Air and Space Power Journal*. Kamps, Charles Tustin. "Operation Eagle Claw: The Iran Hostage Rescue Mission." 21 September 2006. <http://www.maxwell.af.mil/au/cadre/aspj/apjinternational/apj-s/2006/3tri06/kampseng.html>

⁸⁹ Global Security.org. Military. "Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)." No date. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm>

⁹⁰ American University, Inventory of Conflict and Environment. "Iran-Iraq War and Waterway Claims." May 1998. <http://www.american.edu/ted/ice/iraniraq.htm>

equipment, they would later receive weapons from the U.S., despite the embargo on arms sales to Iran, in exchange for their efforts to release U.S. hostages being held in Lebanon.^{91, 92}

By 1982, however, the Iranians had recovered lost territory and rejected Saddam's offer of a ceasefire, opting instead to fight until his regime was toppled. War and revolution were fused together. The notion of compromise and armistice became unthinkable to the leadership of the Islamic Republic. In effect, its commitment to victory transcended conventional strategic calculations, and soldiers were sacrificed to capture a few inches of territory. The conflict settled into a pattern of bloody deadlock reminiscent of World War I; Iran would unleash sporadic, large-scale offensives that would be repulsed by Iraq's better equipped army and lethal chemical attacks.⁹³



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Iranian soldiers in Iran-Iraq War

The End of the War

The regime relied on Shi'a symbols and myths to mobilize support for the cause. Iranian soldiers drawn from the ranks of the *basij* (mobilization of the oppressed), a volunteer corps, ran into Iraqi positions without adequate arms, knowing they would probably be killed. In effect they were willing to die to advance the cause of the revolution and achieve salvation in the afterlife. The government encouraged this mentality.⁹⁴ Throughout this period, Iran's domestic discourse was dominated by revolutionary rhetoric, shifting power to more radical elements with the Ayatollah himself the primary beneficiary.

According to a number of analysts, what brought about an end to the hostilities was the accidental shooting of an Iranian commercial airliner in July 1988 by a U.S. naval vessel in the Persian Gulf.⁹⁵ The Iranians, who believed it was an intentional act, took it as a sign that Washington, officially neutral, was going to become more involved on behalf of Iraq.⁹⁶ In Tehran there was concern, particularly within the military, that this would lead to direct military confrontation with the U.S., which would result in the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. As a result, Khomeini reluctantly accepted a ceasefire which was brokered by the UN, likening it to "drinking poison."⁹⁷ The number of Iranian casualties in the eight-year conflict was estimated to be 300,000, with 500,000 wounded.⁹⁸ The border did not change at all. In fact, the lasting legacy

⁹¹ The National Archives. Archives.gov. "Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh relating to Iran/Contra." 1986–1993. <http://www.archives.gov/research/independent-counsels/walsh.html>

⁹² Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran-Iraq War." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293527/Iran-Iraq-War#>

⁹³ BNET Business Network. *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*. "Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq war – Department of State, March 5, 1984 – transcript." April 1984. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1079/is_v84/ai_3200104

⁹⁴ PBS, Frontline. Sciolino, Elaine. "Martyrs Never Die." Excerpt from *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*. 2000. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/martyrs.html>

⁹⁵ *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. Takeyh, Ray. "Chapter Seven: Iran's New Iraq [p. 174.]" 2006. New York: Times Books.

⁹⁶ TheAtlantic.com. Kaplan, Robert. "A Post-Saddam Scenario." November 2002. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200211/kaplan>

⁹⁷ Daniel Pipes.org. "Iran After Khomeini." August 1989. <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/187>

⁹⁸ Global Security. "The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)." 27 April 2005. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm>

for Iranians was the creation of a preferential system of educational benefits and employment opportunities for veterans who then had a vested interest in preserving the regime which provided their livelihood.⁹⁹

Recent History

The Iran–Contra Affair

As mentioned previously, the Iranians lacked spare parts for their mostly American-made equipment. Acknowledging Iran's desire for weapons, President Ronald Reagan began a covert effort to sell weapons to Iran in return for the release of American hostages held by terrorist groups supposedly under the control of Tehran. This move was made in the face of the White House publically declaring it would not negotiate with terrorists.

Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger pointed out to Reagan that selling missiles to Iran would violate a U.S. embargo on arms sales to Iran, and that even the President of the United States could not break this law. Nor, Weinberger added, would it be legal to use Israel as an intermediary, as was under consideration. Both Secretary of State George Shultz and White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, who were each present, agreed that a secret weapons deal with Iran would be against the law. President Reagan, however, insisted on proceeding, noting he could answer a charge of illegality, but not the charge that he had "passed up a chance to free hostages."

Post-Khomeini Iran

Ayatollah Khomeini died in June 1989. The eight-year war with Iraq and attendant economic decline had caused significant public discontent. Per capita income had plummeted 40% since 1979 and the country, particularly its port facilities, had sustained significant war damage.¹⁰⁰ During most of the 1980s, the government had pursued policies that increased state control of the economy to support the war effort. Now that both the war and the Islamic Republic's founder had passed from the scene, the door was open to debating the future in a way that had not been possible before.

In August 1989, a pragmatist who has been described as a free marketeer Hashemi Rafsanjani, was elected President.¹⁰¹ He promised economic reform and sponsored a five-year plan designed to increase production. The agricultural sector did realize increases after market liberalization measures were introduced. Yet, the government remained beset by ideological differences, which diluted the impact of many of these policies. Tehran also reluctantly conceded the centrality of oil in the national economy. However, selling it in the international marketplace necessitated toning down the



© Mesgary / Wikipedia
Hashemi Rafsanjani

⁹⁹ Washington Quarterly. Ehteshami, Anoushirvan. "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam [p. 119]." Autumn 2003. http://www.twq.com/03autumn/docs/03autumn_ehteshami.pdf

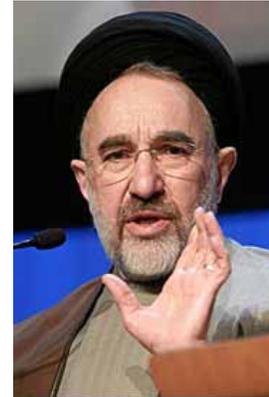
¹⁰⁰ *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Keddie, Nikki. "Chapter Eleven: Politics and Economics in Post-Khomeini Iran [p. 263]." 2003. 2nd Ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁰¹ Foreign Policy. Wright, Robin. "Dateline Tehran: A Revolution Implodes." Summer 1996. <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/Ning/archive/archive/103/datelinetehran.PDF>

quarrelsome rhetoric that had become a hallmark of Iran's foreign policy during the 1980s.¹⁰² Reliance on oil, moreover, was not a remedy for Iran's economic woes. On the contrary, it rendered Iran vulnerable to price swings in the international marketplace. As oil prices slumped in the 1990s, Iran's national debt rose. Inflation approached 30% per annum and workers' protests were met with brutal suppression.

The "Tehran Spring"

The 1997 presidential elections elicited great interest. Over 200 candidates applied to run, including nine women.¹⁰³ The Grand Council screened out all but four. One of those four was Mohammad Khatami, a cleric, and presidential candidate of the reformist wing of the religious establishment. His candidacy was approved on the grounds he was no match for the conservatives' preferred candidate. In a surprise victory, Khatami won a substantial 69% of the popular vote.¹⁰⁴ As a reformist president, he would serve as a counterweight to the clergy. His platform called for greater political freedom, strengthened rule of law, equitable economic development, and a moderate foreign policy. It proved especially popular with Iran's youth, who had come of age after the founding of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰⁵ This led many, both inside and outside Iran, to believe the country was entering a period of fundamental reform.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Mohammad Khatami

Khatami came into office determined to choose his battles carefully to avoid antagonizing conservatives unnecessarily. The slogan became "pressure from below, negotiations at the top."¹⁰⁶ In what was known as "Tehran Spring," censorship laws were liberalized, allowing for greater freedom of expression while the discretionary powers of the supreme leader remained unchallenged. Electoral gains in the parliamentary elections of 2000 seemed to indicate this incremental approach to change was succeeding.

Reform Movement Weakened

Yet the reformers, largely intellectuals, did not create a coalition with other disaffected communities. Labor unions, business groups and other manifestations of civil society were left out and therefore lacked the incentive to maintain popular support when change was not immediately forthcoming. Predictably, the conservatives did their best to subvert the reformers and they maintained control over most of the government. When the economy did not improve as the public expected, segments of the electorate became disgruntled; this opened the door for a conservative resurgence.

¹⁰² Caucasian Review of International Affairs. Gresh, Geoffrey. "Coddling the Caucasus: Iran's Strategic Relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia [p. 3]." Winter 2006. online.org/jurnal_1/Coddling%20the%20Caucasus%20by%20Geoffrey%20Gresh.pdf

¹⁰³ PBS, Frontline. "By Popular Demand: Iranian Elections, 1997–2001." c. 1995–2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/elections.html>

¹⁰⁴ *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. Takeyh, Ray. "Chapter Two: Conservatives, Pragmatists, Reformers [p. 50]." 2006. New York: Times Books.

¹⁰⁵ BBC News. "Iran's youth: Force for change." 23 February 2000. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/644938.stm

¹⁰⁶ Stanford University, Hoover Institution. Milani, Abbas and Michael McFaul. "Solidarity with Iran." 2004. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/digest/3042216.html>

Conservatives attacked Khatami's record on the economy and touted their own accomplishments, principally the development of a nuclear program in the face of international condemnation and sanctions. The events of 11 September 2001 also assisted the conservatives. While residents of Tehran held a candlelight vigil for the victims, Iran was subsequently identified as a member of the "axis of evil." Just as Khomeini engineered the hostage crisis to undermine the moderate government, his disciples utilized the "war on terror" to cast reformers and those who favored engagement with Washington as appeasers.

Recent Events

The election of hard-line conservative candidate Mahmud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005 reverberated in the West. This was likely due to his undiplomatic personality and penchant for hostile pronouncements. Ahmadinejad, an engineer and the first non-cleric to hold this office since 1981, had slipped into an unprecedented second round of balloting by a small margin. At that point, the debate in the campaign shifted to socioeconomic grievances of the urban poor and those in remote parts of the country, who overwhelmingly supported him. A populist, he promised to spread the country's oil wealth among the people and use it to tackle the unemployment problem.



© Manila Rycie
Mahmud Ahmadinejad

Conservatives further solidified their control of the democratic institutions of governance in the March 2008 parliamentary elections. They benefitted from low voter turn-out and the disqualification of reformist candidates.¹⁰⁷ Complete control of the government raised the bar, however. Whereas Khatami could blame the clerical establishment for blocking his agenda, Ahmadinejad had no such defense. As a moderate Iranian newspaper summed it up, "With all the capabilities, and the consolidation of the powers that they enjoy, they should be able to solve all the problems without the slightest excuse."¹⁰⁸

Yet, they have no viable solutions to pressing national problems such as poverty and the polarization of income, despite Ahmadinejad's populist persona.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, his populist agenda has increased government expenditures, resulting in an annual inflation rate of 20%.¹¹⁰ Moreover, his willingness to provide assistance to Iraqi Shi'a groups, rather than using the money to improve the welfare of the Iranian people, is deeply unpopular at home.¹¹¹ Abroad, Ahmadinejad's confrontational stance on Iran's nuclear programs has come to define his

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Institute of Peace. Campbell, Kelly. "Analyzing Iran's Domestic Political Landscape." May 2008. http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2008/0513_iran.html

¹⁰⁸ *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. Takeyh, Ray. "Chapter Two: Conservatives, Pragmatists, Reformers [pp 54–55.]" 2006. New York: Times Books.

¹⁰⁹ Radio Free Europe. Samii, Bill. "Iran: Weak Economy Challenges President." 21 July 2006. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/07/cdcdde09-8bdd-4888-89a7-6d8660d98524.html>

¹¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations. Interview with Farideh Farhi: New Iranian Majlis Will Be Critical of Ahmadinejad on Domestic Issues." 18 March 2008. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/15747/farhi.html>

¹¹¹ Johns Hopkins University, SAISPHERE. "Who Will Help the Iranian People?" 2007. <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/pubaffairs/publications/saisphere/winter07/nafisi.html>

country's foreign-policy outlook and especially its relationship with the U.S.¹¹² On 26 May 2008, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog, issued a report casting doubt on the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear plans.¹¹³

¹¹² The Economist. "Iran." 18 May 2008.

<http://www.economist.com/research/backgrounders/displaybackgrounder.cfm?bg=998452>

¹¹³ The Economist. "Iran: Smoke and mirrors." 29 May 2008.

http://www.economist.com/world/africa/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11465517

Iran Timeline

30,000 B.C.E. – Earliest known hunter-gatherer habitation in the land now known as Iran, south of the Caspian Sea and along the northern Persian Gulf.

4200 B.C.E. – Akkadians, the first pre-Aryan civilization, make their appearance.

3500 B.C.E. – The Elamites arrive and become the dominant civilization in the early 2nd millennium B.C.E.

2000–1800 B.C.E. – Proto-Iranian tribes, the Persians and the Medes, begin their migrations from Central Asia into Iran, supplanting the Elamites.

ca. 1300 B.C.E. – Zarathustra, founder of Zoroastrianism, begins to spread his message.

701 B.C.E. – Daia-Oku unites the Median tribes and reigns from the City of Ecbatana.

615 B.C.E. – The Medians, in alliance with the Scythians and Babylonians, smash the Assyrian Empire.

559 B.C.E. – Persians defeat the Medians. Cyrus the Great heads the great Achaemenian Persian Empire.

486 B.C.E. – **Darius, son of Cyrus, dies, having conquered all the land from Egypt, Turkey, parts of Greece, north to Europe, and south to the Arabian Sea.**

330 B.C.E. – Alexander the Great conquers the entire Persian Empire.

325–579 C.E. – The Golden Age of the Sassanid Empire begins, bringing about a renaissance in science, art, and commerce.

642–650 C.E. – Muslim armies enter Persia and defeat the Sassanids.

1220 – Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde attack Persia and raze almost every major city.

1502 – Shah Ismail I unites Persia and establishes Shi'a Islam as the state of religion in the Safavid Dynasty.

1722 – The Safavid Dynasty comes to an end with the conquest of Esfahan by Mahmoud Khan, an Afghan warlord.

1795 – The Qajars are led to victory by Agha Muhammad Khan, who becomes the new shah and moves the capital to Tehran.

1848 – Naser o-Din Shah assumes power and takes measures intended to modernize the state.

1906 – Iran’s first constitution, drawn up by an elected parliament, is signed by Muhammad Ali Shah.

1907 – Britain and Russia sign the Anglo–Russian Agreement, which divides Persia between the two.

1909 – The Shah is deposed by pro-constitutional forces who oppose foreign meddling in their country.

1925 – Reza Pahlavi, a military officer, is crowned Shah.

1941 August – Iran is invaded from the north by the Soviet Union, and from the south and west by Britain.

1941 September – **Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, son of Reza Shah, assumes the throne after his father abdicates.**

1953 – Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq is overthrown with CIA assistance, and the Shah is back in power.

1979 January – Amid strikes, demonstrations, and violent protests, the Shah is forced to leave Iran, never to return.

1979 February – Ayatollah Khomeini returns from exile.

1979 April – **The Islamic Republic is proclaimed.**

1979 November – Islamic radicals storm the U.S. Embassy and take 70 Americans hostage.

1980 September – **Iraq launches the war against Iran following border skirmishes and a dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway.**

1981 January – American hostages are released after 444 days in captivity.

1988 – Cease-fire in the Iran–Iraq War.

1989 June – Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini dies. He is succeeded by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who served as president from 1981–88, in a life-time appointment.

1995 – The U.S. imposes oil and trade sanctions on Iran for sponsoring terror.

1997 – **Mohammed Khatami is elected president of Iran with 69% of the vote.**

2001 April – Iran and Saudi Arabia sign a major security accord to combat terrorism.

2001 June – Mohammed Khatami is reelected president of Iran by just under 77% of the vote.

2002 – Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization announces Iran's plans to build nuclear power plants.

2003 September – UN nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, gives Tehran weeks to prove it is not pursuing an atomic weapons program.

2003 November – Iran suspends its uranium enrichment program and says it will allow tougher UN inspections.

2004 – Conservatives gain control in parliament as thousands of reformist candidates are disqualified by the hard-line Council of Guardians.

2005 June – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, ultra-conservative mayor of Tehran, is elected president in runoff elections.

2005 August – Tehran resumes uranium conversion and insists that its atomic program is for peaceful purposes.

2006 February – The UN's IAEA votes to report Iran to the UN Security Council over its nuclear activities.

2006 December – After Tehran fails to cease uranium enrichment activities, UN Security Council votes unanimously to impose sanctions on Iran's trade in sensitive nuclear materials and technology.

2007 March – Diplomatic stand-off with Britain ensues after Iran detains 15 British military personnel on routine patrol in international waters in the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab waterway.

2007 May – IAEA predicts Iran could have the capability to develop a nuclear weapon in three to eight years.

2008 March – Ahmadinejad becomes the first Iranian president to make an official visit to Iraq.

2008 March – Conservatives win over two-thirds of seats in parliamentary elections where many reformist candidates are disqualified from electoral competition.

Chapter 4: Economy

Introduction

In contrast to other petroleum-exporting Middle Eastern nations, Iran had a thriving agricultural and commercial sector prior to the oil boom of the 1970s.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, the term “rentier state” was coined in the 1970s to explain Iran’s evolution under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi when the price of oil rose dramatically.¹¹⁵ Since the petroleum industry was state-owned, his government received substantial revenue from oil sales. Under these circumstances, governments generally become autonomous from their societies, unaccountable to their citizens, and autocratic.¹¹⁶ They have no need to tax citizens and therefore are not interested in their input. This was the case with the government under direction of the Shah and this ideology eroded his government’s legitimacy.



© Hamed Saber
Traffic jam in Tehran

After the fall of the Shah and the beginning of the Iranian Republic, Iranians experienced a sharp drop in their standard of living. During the 1980s, the role of the private sector and market allocation came under continuous debate in the new government, which was committed to a redistribution of wealth program. However, the need to finance the eight-year conflict with Iraq outweighed such concerns. The government assumed greater control of the economy, introducing rationing and foreign exchange controls, to support the war effort at a time when the price of oil was declining.¹¹⁷ Since then, the economy has remained in the hands of state actors. In 2008, some Iranian sources, amidst rising food and housing prices, identified the economy as having entered a terminal phase of “Dutch Disease,” whereby heavy reliance on the sale of a natural resource depresses other sectors of the economy.¹¹⁸ The situation has become so dire, the country reportedly imports some 40% of its gasoline needs.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ *The Rentier State*. Beblawi, Hazem and Giacomo Luciani, Eds. Najambadi, Afsaneh. “Chapter Ten: Depoliticisation of a Rentier State: The Case of Pahlavi Iran [p. 211].” 2007. New York: Routledge. http://books.google.com/books?id=PIo9AAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Rentier+State.&sig=6nAIZ5bhO6O4I-q-8v-53p_Ge60

¹¹⁵ *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon*. Yates, Douglas. “Chapter One: The Theory of the Rentier State.” 1996. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press. <http://students.washington.edu/hattar/yates.pdf>

¹¹⁶ Asia Times. Chaulia, Seerem. “Book review: The State Versus Society in Iran *Democracy in Iran* by Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr.” 23 September 2006. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HI23Ak01.html

¹¹⁷ *The Economy of Iran: Dilemmas of an Islamic State*. Alizadeh, Parvin, Ed. “Chapter One: Dilemmas and Prospects for Economic Reform and Reconstruction in Iran [p. 36].” 2001. London: I.B. Taurus. <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=zu8q4fvh26sC&dq=the+economy+of+iran+dilemmas&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=PrVVM4UUCe&sig=D-Eex8SIT2Sv8xzmoUHRHA7D4E4#PPA36,M1>

¹¹⁸ American Enterprise Institute Online, Middle Eastern Outlook. Alfoneh, Ali. “Ahmadinejad Versus the Technocrats.” 8 May 2008. http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.27966/pub_detail.asp

¹¹⁹ New York Times. Week in Review. MacFarquhar, Neil, “How the Iranian Leader Keeps the West Off Balance.” 17 December 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/17/weekinreview/17MacFARQUHAR.html?ref=weekinreview>

Oil

Petroleum, discovered in 1908, and natural gas, both found in abundance, represent the mainstay of Iranian industry and fuel the national economy. Oil sales represent 80% of Iran's export revenue.¹²⁰

In September 1960, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was founded in Baghdad, Iraq. Iran signed the charter as a founding member. Since then, as OPEC's second-largest oil exporter along with Saudi Arabia, Iran has, in public, favored strict adherence to production quotas.¹²¹ Both have cut production to maintain prices when the situation warrants. Iran, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has the potential to increase its output.



© A. Masoud
Port in Bandar Abbas

While the prospect of higher prices for the foreseeable future represents good news for Iran, in fact, production peaked in 1974.¹²² In part, this is due to Khomeini's decision to reduce production to levels sufficient to meet foreign exchange needs.¹²³ Efforts to increase production since then have been impeded by a number of factors: the eight-year war with Iraq, limited investment, U.S. and UN sanctions, as well as aging oil fields. Iran's recovery rate of 24% is far lower than the World average of 35% which means that for each ton of oil extracted, at least two tons remain in the ground.¹²⁴ In developing its oil fields, Iran has decided to use domestic technology, despite the possibility they may recover less than foreign investors who have developed state-of-the-art equipment.¹²⁵ Tehran has periodically boasted of new oil reserves, but outsiders are unsure of how much actually exists.

In addition to oil, Iran has an abundance of natural gas, another increasingly important commodity. Iran's natural gas reserves are believed to be in the range of 26.7 trillion cubic m (940 trillion cubic ft).¹²⁶ This increases Iran's value as an energy producer since the demand for natural gas is growing at a rate faster than that for oil. Yet, exports are expected to be minimal owing to domestic demand.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ National Public Radio. Weiner, Eric. "Iran's Other Potential WMD: Crude Oil." 26 January 2006. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5173241>

¹²¹ Before Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and the subsequent sanctions, Iraq exported slightly more petroleum than Iran. According to WTRG Economics (<http://www.wtrg.com/opeckshare.html>), Iraq's export as of January 1990 accounted for 12.79% of OPEC's market share, while Iran's accounted for 11.72%.

¹²² Greg Croft Inc. "Peak Oil: Fact and Fiction." No date. <http://www.gregcroft.com/peakoil.ivnu>

¹²³ Global Security. "Oil." 27 April 2005. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/oil.htm>

¹²⁴ Energy Information Administration, Country Analysis Briefs. "Iran." October 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Iran/Full.html>

¹²⁵ International Herald Tribune. Karimi, Nasser. "Iran Tries to Develop Oil Fields on its Own." 12 May 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/05/12/business/iranoil.php>

¹²⁶ *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*. Howard, Roger. "Chapter One: Why Iran's Natural Resources Matter [p. 6]." 2007. London: I.B. Taurus.

¹²⁷ Energy Information Administration. Country Analysis Briefs. "Iran: Natural Gas." October 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Iran/NaturalGas.html>

Industry

Auto manufacturing is one oil-related industry that is doing well, despite the sanctions imposed on Iran. With an annual production of one million vehicles, Iran has the largest auto market in the Middle East and Central Asia. To gain access to an emerging market, some European and Asian car manufacturers have entered into licensing arrangements, although they do not maintain a corporate presence in Iran.¹²⁸

Carpet making is another important industry in Iran.¹²⁹ Although most trade with the U.S. is prohibited by executive orders and Congressional legislation, an exception exists for Persian carpets: U.S. citizens can legally purchase and import carpets from Iran up to a certain cash value. Nonetheless, Persian carpets face stiff competition from other traditional carpet exporters, as well as high-quality Chinese copies in the international marketplace.¹³⁰

Agriculture

The agricultural sector accounts for 11% of Iran's GDP and employs approximately 25% of the labor force. Despite having over 10 million ha (2.47 a) of arable land, 10% of which can support crop cultivation, permanent crops are only found on 1.3% of it.¹³¹ Iran imports 30–50% of its domestic food consumption requirements.



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Spring blossoms at a farm in Karaj

Farmers in Iran produce a wide variety of goods including nuts, fruits, rice, wheat, and tobacco. Although growth is constrained by insufficient rainfall, antiquated equipment, lack of inputs, and limited knowledge on the part of farmers, crop production accounts for about two thirds of farm income. Iran is self-sufficient in wheat production, although this is the result of expanded irrigation, which makes the home-grown product more expensive than imports. Achieving self-sufficiency in food production is part of national security.

Animal husbandry accounts for the remaining one third of the agricultural income. Traditionally, livestock was maintained by nomads who migrated to pastureland on a seasonal basis. Today, there are livestock ranches that have increased the supply of meat. However, some meat is still imported as a means of stabilizing market prices.¹³²

¹²⁸ CNN Money, Fortune Magazine. Ellis, Erik. "Made in Iran." 18 September 2006.

http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/09/18/8386173/index.htm

¹²⁹ American University, Ted Case Studies. Hoang, My Hanh. "Persian Carpets." Fall 2004.

<http://www.american.edu/ted/persian-rugs.htm>

¹³⁰ Iran Daily, Economic Focus. "Improving Carpet Export." 30 October 2006. <http://www.iran-daily.com/1385/2694/html/focus.htm>

¹³¹ CIA World Factbook. "Iran." 15 May 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

¹³² CattleNetwork. "Iran Agriculture: 20% GDP; Largely Self Sufficient in Wheat." 4 November 2007. <http://www.cattlenetwork.com/Content.asp?ContentID=173785>

Banking

In the early days of Persia, temples and princes handled money exchanges. The Persians minted their first gold coin, the *derick*, more than 2,500 years ago. After the adoption of Islam, which forbids interest-based transactions, the use of bank notes and coins in trade stagnated for centuries. Since then, Iran has gone through many stages in its financial development, from the early days of money changers, through the presence of the British-owned Bank Shahanshahi (Imperial Bank), founded in the 1880s, to the establishment of the Central Bank of Iran in 1928, representing the first national independent financial institution.¹³³

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, all banks were nationalized. By the 1980s, Iranian banking had come full circle; Islamic banking was introduced and therefore lending institutions had to be in compliance with Islamic prohibitions against usury (*reba*), which prohibits charging interest. In order to remain solvent, Islamic banks have come up with alternative forms of risk sharing.

Consumer lending is problematic for Islamic banks, given their inability to make a profit. In addition, loans to individuals fall outside the scope of Iran's formal banking system. As a result, a thriving informal credit market exists. Housed mostly in bazaars, information is easily obtained in this environment about both lenders and borrowers, since it hosts bath and tea houses where men socialize. Moneylenders (*sarrafi*) run their businesses much like curbside markets.¹³⁴ The markup, or the amount the borrower agrees to repay along with the repayment date, is high because of the risk. Borrowers don't offer collateral, since they will suffer ostracism from the group represented by the lender, in the event of non-repayment.¹³⁵ Therefore, lenders do not make loans to strangers.¹³⁶

Transportation

Iran's major industrial areas and human settlement centers are in the north, while its major ports are on its southern gulf coastline. As such, economic integration required a transportation network that could transcend vast distances.¹³⁷ The first Iranian railroad was built in the late 19th century. One by one, the major cities starting with Tehran were linked



© Jonathan Lundqvist
Truck on a desert road, southern Iran

¹³³ Iran Chamber Society. "History of Banking in Iran." No date. http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/banking_history.php

¹³⁴ *Bazaar and State in Iran: The Politics of the Tehran Marketplace*. Keshavarzian, Arang. "Chapter Three: Bazaar Transformations: Networks, Transformations, and Solidarities [p. 91]." 2007. New York: Cambridge University Press. http://books.google.com/books?id=_NKL8-6B9OYC&pg=RA1-PA87&lpg=RA1-PA87&dq=bazaars+iran+money+lenders&source=web&ots=CK3rGhS2lh&sig=Z7ckS9_UDdgK6Z2A7jnIvSijPXA&hl=en#PRA1-PA91,M1

¹³⁵ This is a common arrangement in societies with weak regulatory structure where reputation assumes a monetary value. Wiley, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. *Economics and Politics* 2, No. 1. Milgrom, Paul and Douglas C. North, Barry Weingast. "The Role of Institutions in the Revival of Trade: The Law Merchant, Private Judges, and the Champagne Fairs [pp. 1–23.]" 27 Oct 2006.

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119383680/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0>

¹³⁶ CEMOTI. Gadahassi, Maryam. "Informal financial institutions in bazaar." 31 March 2004.

<http://cemoti.revues.org/document634.html>

¹³⁷ BBC News (International Version). Plummer, Robert. "Analysis: Iran's Rail Expansion." 18 February 2004.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3499947.stm

by shining steel rails. In 1939, the Trans-Iranian Railway was inaugurated, linking the Persian Gulf city of Bandar-e Emam Khomeini (formerly Bandar-e Shahpur) with the Caspian Sea town of Bandar-e Torkaman (formerly Bandar-e Shah), with Tehran as an intermediate stop.

A total of 8,367 km (5,200 mi) of railroad tracks crisscross Iran.¹³⁸ Since 2000, an average 500 km (311 mi) of new track have been laid each year, making Iran the Middle Eastern leader in rail expansion.¹³⁹ A high-speed train connects Tehran with Esfahan. A line that links Kerman in southeastern Iran with Quetta, across the border in Pakistan, is scheduled for completion in 2008.¹⁴⁰ The country also has a total of 179,388 km (111, 466 mi) of highways, including 120,782 km (75,050, mi) of paved roads and 58,606 km (36,416 mi) of unpaved roads. Of the 129 paved airports that dot the map of Iran, 40 are full-service airports, each with runways exceeding 3,000 m (9,842 ft).¹⁴¹

Tourism

“Iran, the Land of Civilization and Friendship,” is the slogan adopted by the National Department of Tourism to beckon visitors to a country associated with Islamic extremism.¹⁴² The Iranian tourist industry is hampered by sanctions that make it difficult to spend U.S. dollars there. Washington bans most trade with the Islamic Republic and no direct air links exist between the two countries. Nonetheless, U.S. citizens are permitted to visit the country and can receive a seven-day visitor’s visa upon arrival.



The Imam Mosque in Esfahan is a tourist attraction

Those who do visit find monuments from the past all over the country; a testament to the sophisticated culture of ancient Persia. Esfahan is the country’s architectural showpiece, and Shiraz is famous for its poetic atmosphere, as well as the place where Persians fermented wine well before the birth of Christ. If historical sites are not of interest, the country offers a variety of outdoor activities. In the north lies the Caspian Sea with beautiful beaches, forest parks, and wildlife reserves. Beaches also abound on the Persian Gulf coast, where mild weather permits swimming year round. In addition, there are several ski resorts around Tehran.

¹³⁸ CIA World Factbook. “Iran.” 15 May 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

¹³⁹ Asia Times. Peimani, Hooman. “Iran Stakes a Claim to the Silk Road.” 14 August 2003. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EH14Ak01.html

¹⁴⁰ Guardian.co.uk. Evans, Paul. “Railing Back the Years in Iran.” 6 May 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2008/may/06/iran.rail>

¹⁴¹ CIA Factbook. “Iran.” 15 May 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html#Trans>

¹⁴² LA Weekly. Voeten, Teun. “This is Iran, Too.” 3 January 2007. <http://www.laweekly.com/news/features/this-is-iran-too/15326/>

Chapter 5: Society

Ethnic Groups

Although Iran is a predominantly Shi'a Muslim state, Persians comprise only a slim majority of the population. The Azeris are the largest minority, roughly 30% of the population. They are less interested in separatism than in the government living up to its promises, such as teaching minority languages, as stipulated in the Constitution. Having achieved prominent positions within Iranian society and the religious hierarchy, the Azeris nonetheless remain the target of media jokes. Indeed, Persian chauvinism is a common complaint from all ethnic minorities in Iran.¹⁴³ Some ethnic groups are more restive than others.¹⁴⁴ Kurds, for example, harbor separatist aspirations. Other minorities include Baluchis, who inhabit the most underdeveloped region of Iran in the southeast, and Arabs.¹⁴⁵

Hospitality and Other Customs

Opulent hospitality remains an enduring tradition in Iran. As one Western visitor reported, "I found a country where total strangers would offer any help they could, be it in the form of directions, food, or even a place to stay."¹⁴⁶

Interpersonal space and other aspects of daily social interaction and behavior differ in Iran, however. What people in the West might consider a taboo topic for discussion (e.g., how much one earns) could easily pop up in a casual conversation. Moreover, members of the same sex stand closer to one another in social situations, inches away rather than feet. Holding hands, kissing on the cheek, and hugging are commonly accepted gestures of friendship between those of the same sex. Such exchanges do not occur between males and females unless they are husband and wife, parent and child, or perhaps brother and sister. Even then, such displays of affection are not acted out in public, except between a parent and a small child.



© K. Adi
A group of bakers in Tehran

Education

Primary and Secondary Education

Primary education in Iran is compulsory and free under the constitution. Secondary education is also free. Children start school at age six and 95% of all children are enrolled in primary or secondary education. Elementary education covers the first five years of schooling, followed by three years of what is referred to as the guidance cycle (*doreh- ye rahnemai*), which is equivalent

¹⁴³ The Atlantic. Wood, Graeme. "Iran: A Minority Report." December 2006.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200612/wood-iran>

¹⁴⁴ Radio Free Liberty. Samii, Bill. "Analysis: Tehran Confronts an Ethnically Diverse Population." 9 May 2006.

<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/05/96d3dd51-eed7-44a5-849e-dadaf2e35bd4.html>

¹⁴⁵ Council of Foreign Relations. Beehner, Lionel. "Iran's Ethnic Groups." 29 November 2006.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/12118/>

¹⁴⁶ The Guardian. "Letter: Iran's Hospitality." 11 October 2007.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/11/iran.travel>

to middle school where students are tracked according to ability and interest. After the guidance cycle, students enter a four-year high school (either college preparatory or vocational), which are both referred to as secondary education or *diplom-e mottevasseteh*.¹⁴⁷

In urban areas all schools are single-sex and female students are required to wear a veil. Ironically, segregated schools, where there is a mandatory dress code and an Islamic curriculum, opened the door for the female offspring of more conservative families to study.¹⁴⁸ “Before the revolution, religious parents would not let their girls even go to school for fear they would be dishonored,” said Parvaneh Rashidi, a Tehran schoolteacher.¹⁴⁹



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School girls on a field trip to Persepolis

In remote rural areas distances between communities can be considerable. Under these circumstances, special provisions have been made to allow co-educational, multi-grade primary schools. Because secondary schools are not allowed such provisions, students may need to take a bus to get to the nearest school, which can be as much as an hour's ride away. As a result, many girls who were allowed to attend classes at an elementary school within walking distance are not able to travel long distances to continue their studies.¹⁵⁰

University

The demand for higher education is fueled by the fact that more than 50% of the country's 66 million people are under the age of 25. As a result, college admission is highly competitive and depends on the National Entrance Examination, or *konkur*. The *konkur* is a 4.5 hour multiple choice exam that covers all subjects taught in high school. Cram schools do a flourishing business to help those who can afford it gain admittance to the most prestigious public schools, such as Tehran University and Sharif Polytechnical University. Many categories of preference exist, for example a student's veteran status or willingness to study at a local school to prevent crowding in urban areas.¹⁵¹

Iranians take a great deal of pride in their traditional reverence for higher education, which predates the introduction of Islam into Persia.¹⁵² There are 52 state universities, 28 medical universities, and numerous government research institutes throughout Iran. There are currently well over one million students, approximately 44% of whom are female, pursuing post-

¹⁴⁷ British Council. “Education in Iran.” No date. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/iran-discover-iran-education-in-iran-education-system.htm>

¹⁴⁸ PBS, Adventure Divas. “Iran on the Verge.” 2001–2003. <http://www.pbs.org/adventuredivas/iran/groundwork/index.html>

¹⁴⁹ Brown University. Beeman, William. “Iranian Women's Situation Has Improved Under Islamic Republic.” January 2001. http://www.brown.edu/Administration/News_Bureau/2000-01/00-067.html

¹⁵⁰ UNICEF. “At a Glance: Iran (Islamic Republic of).” 2006. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran_30050.html

¹⁵¹ International Higher Education. Kamyab, Shahrzad. “The University Entrance Exam Crisis in Iran.” Spring 2008. http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/Number51/p22_Kamyab.htm

¹⁵² Chronicle of Higher Education. Labi, Aisha. “Among Scholars, Resistance and Resilience in Iran.” 1 August 2008. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i47/47a00101.htm>

secondary education. Over half of these students are enrolled at one of the 25 private universities which charge tuition.¹⁵³

Gender Issues

Status of Women

Under the Pahlavi dynasty, Iranian women received the right to vote as well as the right to an equal voice in court and before the law. In addition, a Family Protection Act was put in place in 1963, giving women significant rights in the area of divorce law and setting the minimum marriage age for females at 18 years. Attempts to use laws to bar women from wearing veils in public places, promoted by Shah Reza Pahlavi in the 1930s, proved successful for only short periods of time due to religious concerns.

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, much of the freedom women had enjoyed was lost to fundamentalist fervor. Women who wore Western-style clothing in public were quickly denounced as having loose morals. Some Iranian leftists protested the compulsory veiling (*hejab*) regulation introduced in March 1979. Yet the new government's anti-imperialist economic program left them unable to challenge its repressive policies toward females.¹⁵⁴ In recent years the *makne*, a long scarf which covers the head, neck and ears, has become an acceptable alternative to the *chador* (black robe) for younger residents of Tehran.¹⁵⁵



© youngrobv / flickr.com
Mother & daughters in Esfahan

Today Iran is a land of anomalies and nowhere is that more evident than the status of women. One visitor en route to the airport in Tehran in 2006 reported being shocked to see “two young women on in-line skates, clutching the door handles of a car being driven by a young man at speeds approaching 95 km (60 mi) an hour. Both women brazenly violated every traffic law known to man, but with their head scarves in place, the loose ends firmly clenched between their teeth.”¹⁵⁶

This vignette underscores the misconception that headscarves reflect meekness or female passivity.¹⁵⁷ Iranian women seek higher education in droves, undeterred by the difficulties in finding a job in their chosen field in a crowded labor market. As one expert observed, “Iranian society, which once saw too few girls attending school, now sees too many young women leaving university with little chance of finding a job.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ British Council. “Education in Iran.” No date. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/iran-discover-iran-education-in-iran-education-system.htm>

¹⁵⁴ The Nation. Afary, Janet and Kevin Anderson. “The Iranian Impasse.” 27 June 2007. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070716/afary/2>

¹⁵⁵ The Odyssey, Middle East. Flores, Monica. “The *Hejab* in Iran: Don’t Leave Home Without It...” 1 April 2000. <http://www.worldtrek.org/odyssey/mideast/040100/040100monchador.html>

¹⁵⁶ New York Times. Koppel, Ted. “An Offer Tehran Can’t Refuse.” 2 October 2006. http://select.nytimes.com/2006/10/02/opinion/02koppel.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=visiting+iran+credit+card+&st=nyt&oref=slogin

¹⁵⁷ Silicon Valley Metro. Nelson, Cynthia. “Behind the Chador Curtain.” 2 January 2008. <http://www.metroactive.com/bohemian/01.02.08/arts-iran-0801.html>

¹⁵⁸ Radio Free Liberty. Esfandiari, Golnaz. “Iran: Number of Female Students Rising Dramatically.” 19 November 2003. http://www.parstimes.com/women/women_universities.html

The *hejab* dress code for women, viewed as a sign of oppression in the West, does enable those employed outside the home to keep unwanted sexual advances at bay in the workplace. Women are represented in almost all professions including medicine and other scientific fields. Discouraged or prevented from studying or working in fields traditionally filled by men, even those taboos are now breaking down. Women now drive buses in Tehran and manage construction crews.

Mohammed Khatami was viewed as an advocate for women's rights. His election to the presidency in 1997 has been credited to the female vote by some analysts.¹⁵⁹ Many were fearful when he was succeeded in 2005 by Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a social conservative who proclaimed a woman's place was in the home caring for the family. Contrary to those fears, little has changed under his administration. As a female Iranian blogger pointed out, while Ahmadinejad has encouraged large families, Iran's poor economy acts as a constraint on family size.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, the economy has forced more married women into the workforce since many families require two paychecks to survive.¹⁶¹

Male-Female Relationships

Today, girls can be legally married as soon as they reach puberty, which can be as early as nine years of age, although this is more common in rural areas than urban communities. Traditionally, marriages were arranged by parents. The young man's parents would go to the parents of the young woman to ask for her hand in marriage. The couple would meet only after all the arrangements had been made. Nowadays, young people of the opposite sex, particularly those who live in cities, are allowed to become acquainted under parental supervision. For those who go to college, it is a good place to meet potential spouses.

Marriage between cousins, a practice preventing outsiders from gaining a share of an extended family's wealth, still occurs in Iran. This is becoming less common as modern technology and social trends expand Iranians' circle of acquaintances, colleagues, and friends. As marriage is a rite of passage for all, older members of the family are perennially on the lookout for suitable spouses for their nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and younger cousins. In contrast with western traditions, it is customary for the groom's family to pay for the wedding-related expenses. After the wedding, the groom's family members arrange parties and invite the bride's family for a gift exchange.

The divorce laws make it easy for men but difficult for women to end a marriage unilaterally. The latter is done at the discretion of the court in which all judges are men. Cases can drag on for years before legal resolution. The practice of stoning supposedly adulterous women to death was



© seier+seier / flickr.com
Iranian family visiting Esfahan

¹⁵⁹ University of Rhode Island. Hughes, Donna. "Women in Iran – A look at President Khatami's first year in office." October 1998. <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/khatami.htm>

¹⁶⁰ Boston Globe. Smith, James and Anne Barnard. "Iran Bloggers Tests Regime's Tolerance." 18 December 2006. http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2006/12/18/iran_bloggers_test_regimes_tolerance/

¹⁶¹ BBC News (International Edition). Saberi, Roxana. "Women's Rights on the Iran Agenda." 9 March 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4787190.stm

common until January 2003, when the Iranian judiciary instructed judges to stop carrying out this punishment.

One custom, the “temporary marriage” or *sigheh*, has recently been revived. This is a union lasting anywhere from several minutes to 99 years. It originated as a means for Muslim men on their way to Mecca to enjoy sexual relations without violating their religious principles. Subsequently banned by Sunni Muslims, it was never renounced by the Shi’a. Today in Iran it has even received official promotion because, in the face of bleak employment prospects, many young people must delay marriage.¹⁶² In effect, “*sigheh* legally wraps premarital sex in an Islamic cloak.”¹⁶³ While Muslim men may enter into such marriages with non-Muslim women, Muslim women can only wed Muslim men.

The Arts

The land now known as Iran was subject to tribal migrations, invasion, and occupation throughout its 7,000-year history. As a result, the region’s art and architectural styles constitute a blend of different cultural influences. While these varying influences make it hard to pinpoint distinct characteristics of Persian art, it is safe to say that it is “generally characterized by its firm lines, extensive detail, and bold use of color.”¹⁶⁴

Persian art has gained special recognition in several key areas. The exceptional quality of handmade Persian carpets is well known throughout the world, and the innovative style of mosque design and tile decoration, developed around the 7th century C.E., proved very influential in the Muslim world. The ornate miniature paintings adorning books from the Safavid period (also 7th century C.E.) onward represent a great achievement in Persian art. Miniature painting not only served to portray historical and religious events and legends, but often also doubled as a form of “visual poetry,” in which shapes and words were blended into an almost animated form of prose.¹⁶⁵



© Sebastia Giralt
Inside Imam Mosque, Esfahan

The art of carpet making in Persia dates back at least 2,500 years, when rugs were used by nomads to cover the floors and entrances of their tents. As weaving techniques were refined, Persian kings began to place the most exquisite examples in their palaces. Specific patterns and color schemes are associated with different regions.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² The Guardian. Tait, Robert. “Iranian Minister Backs Temporary Marriage to Relieve Lust of Youth.” 4 June 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jun/04/iran.roberttait>

¹⁶³ New York Times. Sciolino, Elaine. “Love Finds a Way in Iran: ‘Temporary Marriage.’” 4 October 2000. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/tmpmrig.htm>

¹⁶⁴ Persian Paintings. “Persian Art.” No date. <http://www.persianpaintings.com/history.html>

¹⁶⁵ University of Calgary. Far, Behrouz Homayoun. “The Persian Art of Visual Poetry.” No date. <http://www.enel.ucalgary.ca/People/far/hobbies/iran/miniature/miniature.html>

¹⁶⁶ American University, Trade and Environment Database Case Studies. Hoang, My Hanh. “Persian Rugs.” Fall 2004. <http://www.american.edu/ted/persian-rugs.htm>

Literature

In literary prose, one of the oldest collections of stories, *The 1001 Nights*, originated in Persia despite the fact that the common English title, *Arabian Nights*, suggests otherwise.¹⁶⁷ In *The 1001 Nights*, Scheherazade is the newest wife of the vengeful Sultan Shahriyar. Prior to marrying Scheherazade, the Sultan killed all his wives the morning after each wedding night in revenge for the unfaithfulness of one of his former wives. Scheherazade fears the same fate for herself, and therefore tells him one unfinished story each night, thus keeping the Sultan in suspense and keeping herself alive for one more day. Finally, enthralled with Scheherazade's story telling, the Sultan changes his mind, and during the years, she bears him three sons, proving her love.

One of the most beloved Persian story collections, *Kalile-o-Dimne*, has its roots in ancient India. Bidpai, a Hindu sage, is credited with authorship, but the book acquired masterpiece status only after the scholar Burzuwayh translated it into Persian around the 5th century C.E. The Sassanid King, Khosro Anoushrawan, sent Burzuwayh to India to collect and translate Bidpai's fables into Persian. In the process, Burzuwayh added stories to the collection by authors other than Bidpai.

Poetry

Poetry is even more important than prose in Persian culture. Iranians proudly claim that they "have the highest per-capita number of poets" in the world.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, the first forms of poetry surfaced here around the 13th century B.C.E. with the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian holy text. Persian poetry as it exists today emerged in the 9th century C.E., maintaining the Persian identity in the form of free verse during the centuries of invasion. Hafez, a poet who lived during the 14th century, has the equivalent standing in his homeland as Shakespeare enjoys in the English-speaking world.¹⁶⁹



© H. Masoumi
Old man reading

Iranian poets have found unique ways of upholding the traditional use of imagery, literary and Koranic allusions, and reliance upon the beauty of the language itself for effect (the latter makes interpretation of the poetry in the West quite difficult). Omar Khayyam is world-famous for his book of poems, the *Rubaiyat*. The word *Rubaiyat* derives from the Arabic, meaning quatrains, or four lines of verse. Edward FitzGerald's translation is widely acclaimed in the English-speaking world and represents the highest poetic value. In addition to being a poet, Khayyam was a renowned mathematician, philosopher, and man of science.

Early 20th-century and modern Iranian poetry, marked by influences from the West, include verses that champion women's emancipation and other pressing social issues. Among the most prominent poets in this area are Iraj Mirza (1874–1926) and Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967), one of Iran's few internationally celebrated female poets.

¹⁶⁷ Mihan Foundation. "Iranian Literature and Its Impact on Europe." No date. <http://www.mihanfoundation.org/literature/europe2.html>

¹⁶⁸ Iranologie.com. "Literature Page." 2005. <http://www.iranologie.com/literature/litr.html>

¹⁶⁹ Worldpress.org. Cochrane, Paul. "A Vintage Twist for Iran's Classic Poets." 28 November 2004. <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/1985.cfm>

Film

Iranian films have become a staple on the art house circuit after winning awards at international film festivals.¹⁷⁰ The secondary status of women is a favorite theme through which societal power relationships are explored.¹⁷¹ Females are not necessarily portrayed as victims, however. Instead they are presented as finding ways to get what they want without challenging authority directly. In *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), directed by female filmmaker Marziyeh Meshkini, a young girl awakes in a coastal town on the day of her ninth birthday, when she must start to wear a chador and can no longer play with boys. She resourcefully points out to her elders that, according to Persian custom, her birthday does not begin until noon. This enables her to spend the morning in the company of her best friend, a boy of the same age.¹⁷²

In Jafar Pahlani's film *Offside* (2006), viewers are introduced to a group of teenage girls en route to a stadium for a World Cup playoff game, a situation that was based on his own daughter's experience. Despite efforts to conceal their gender to gain admittance to the male-only venue, they end up in an onsite makeshift detention center. The guards, young soldiers from the countryside, are resentful they can not watch the game themselves owing to the girls' caper. The soldiers lack the sophistication to address the claims of discrimination raised by their female captives, showing the rural-urban divide in understanding gender relations. The detention, in effect, becomes a metaphor for the contradictions, restrictions, and injustices facing all citizens of the Islamic Republic.¹⁷³

Bahman Ghobadi, an ethnic Kurd, has also found favor on the art house circuit. His films depict Kurds as perpetually on the move within their historic homeland, which spans several separate countries.¹⁷⁴ In his most recent film, *Half Moon Mamo* (2006), an aging musician borrows a bus to go to a concert on the Iraqi side of the border to celebrate the fall of Saddam Hussein. His entourage includes a woman who must remain hidden in transit because public performances by female singers in Iran, considered a form of eroticism, are banned. The difficulties involved, particularly encounters with suspicious non-Kurdish speaking border guards, are presented in a comedic fashion. Yet the audience never loses sight of the indignities suffered by the Kurds owing to their lack of a territorial state.



© Sebastia Giralt
Movie theater in Shiraz

¹⁷⁰ *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Keddie, Nikki. "Chapter 12: Society, Gender, Culture, Intellectual Life [p. 299]." 2003. Second Edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁷¹ Cornell University. "Cinema presents 'The Veil and the Screen: Iranian Women on Film' in March." 28 February 2002. <http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicle/02/2.28.02/cinema.html>

¹⁷² Chicago Reader, On Film. Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Under the Chador." 1 April 2001. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/2001/0104/010406.html>

¹⁷³ LA Weekly. Khazeni, Doria. "The Beautiful Game." 21 March 2007. <http://www.laweekly.com/film+tv/film/the-beautiful-game/15951/>

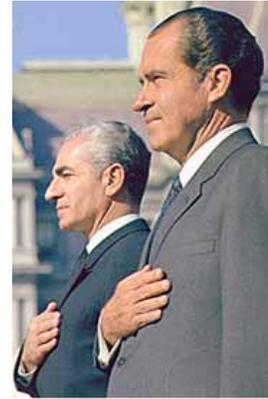
¹⁷⁴ BBC News. "The 4th London Kurdish Film Festival." 22 April 2007. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A21977841>

Chapter 6 Security

History of U.S.-Iranian Relations

Relations with the Pahlavi Dynasty

While diplomatic contacts between the U.S. and Iran date back to the late 18th century, the relationship assumed importance only after World War II. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ascended to the peacock throne in 1941, after his father, who founded the dynasty, abdicated. The new Shah lacked the ability to consolidate his authority. To address various societal tensions, he liberalized the political system. Parties were allowed to field candidates for election to parliament (*Majlis*) which in turn selected Mohammed Mossadeq to serve as Prime Minister. Mossadeq's efforts to nationalize the Iranian oil industry met with alarm in both London and Washington and he was subsequently overthrown in a coup in 1953.



Courtesy of NARA
Nixon & Shah in U.S., 1969

In the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration, supported Mossadeq's removal, mainly due to Cold War concerns. In particular, Prime Minister Mossadeq's connections to the Iranian Communist Party (*Tudeh*), which supported oil nationalization, were deemed unacceptable to British and American interests. Banned under Reza Shah, *Tudeh* had not disappeared, but simply gone underground. From Washington's perspective, Mossadeq's success would strengthen communist influence in Tehran and inevitably draw Iran into the U.S.S.R.'s sphere of influence.¹⁷⁵

The Beginnings of U.S. Iranian Military Relations

Cold War considerations led the U.S. to help train Iranian military and develop intelligence agencies to protect the Pahlavi monarchy. The U.S. established a military advisory and technical assistance program in Iran in 1947; Iranian officers began training in the U.S. In 1950, the U.S. initiated a military assistance grant program to Iran. A bilateral defense agreement occurred later in 1959.

Iran remained important to Washington since Soviet leader Khrushchev had characterized it as a decaying monarchy, ripe for a communist takeover. Reza Shah, who had spent most of Mossadeq's tenure in Italy with his family, brooked no opposition and maintained a pro-American foreign policy. Regardless of its benefits for the country as a whole, his stance set him up for the charge that he was an instrument of imperialist interests.

The Years Leading up to the Islamic Revolution

In 1977, under pressure from Washington, the Shah eased censorship regulations. This move emboldened his detractors who fell into two camps.¹⁷⁶ One was the religious movement headed by the *mullahs* (religious scholars) who demanded restoration of Shari'a law and a government

¹⁷⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. *Iran*. "Mossadeq and Oil Nationalization." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/iran/17.htm>

¹⁷⁶ Boston Review. Milani, Abbas. "Pious Populist: Understanding the Rise of Iran's President." November/December 2007. <http://bostonreview.net/BR32.6/milani.php>

administration by clerics. They mobilized support through a flurry of pro-Khomeini publications. The other was a secular movement disproportionately led by Iranians educated overseas who wanted to emulate the democracy, economic freedom, and human rights they had experienced in the West. The two coalesced into one group, bound only by their antipathy toward the monarch.¹⁷⁷

U.S. military assistance to Iran between 1947 and 1969 exceeded \$1.4 billion. After 1969, Iran assumed its own military costs with revenues from its growing oil exports. In the six years before the Islamic Revolution, U.S. military aid in the form of technical assistance rose rapidly. In 1978, with 1,500 U.S. defense personnel and 45,000 military and civilian technicians and their dependents living in Iran, the U.S. military mission there was the largest in the world.¹⁷⁸

In January 1978, U.S. President Jimmy Carter made an official visit to Iran. He toasted the Shah's achievements with these words of praise: "If ever there was a country which has blossomed under enlightened leadership, it would be the ancient empire of Persia."¹⁷⁹ Outside, student demonstrators protested the government's attacks on Ayatollah Khomeini. They demanded that the exiled religious leader be allowed to return. The police, in an ill-planned response, opened fire, killing 70-some protestors.¹⁸⁰

A year later, Reza Shah, terminally ill, lost his grip on power and was forced to flee in the face of mounting discontent. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran after nearly two decades in exile and established the Islamic Republic in March 1979.



Courtesy of NARA
Shah & Carter at the White House, 1977

The Hostage Crisis

Few countries were eager to incur the wrath of the new Islamic Republic by granting the ailing Shah refuge or residence. Following a brief stay in Egypt, he was allowed to enter the U.S. for cancer treatment. This decision, made on humanitarian grounds, was interpreted by Khomeini and radical Islamic militants as an indication that the U.S. planned to invade Iran and restore the Shah to power. On 1 November 1979, hundreds of thousands turned out in Tehran to protest Washington. They demanded the extradition of the Shah to face "justice" in a revolutionary court and an apology for the U.S.'s role in overthrowing the government of Mohammed Mossadeq and returning the Pahlavi monarch to power.¹⁸¹

With Khomeini's support and encouragement, a group of students led by militant clerics stormed the U.S. Embassy on 4 November 1979. Seventy U.S. citizens were taken hostage; 52 were kept imprisoned for 444 days. From the Iranian perspective, such a dramatic severing of ties reduced Washington's ability to influence events inside their country. President Carter tried to resolve the

¹⁷⁷ Washington State University. Hooker, Richard. "The Iranian Revolution." 1996. <http://www.wsu.edu:8000/~dee/SHIA/REV.HTM>

¹⁷⁸ Global Security. "Iran Military Introduction." No date. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/intro.htm>

¹⁷⁹ *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change From Hawaii to Iraq*. Kinzer, Stephen. "Chapter Nine: A Graveyard Smell." [p. 202]. 2006. New York: Times Books.

¹⁸⁰ Washington State University. Hooker, Richard. "The Iranian Revolution." 1996. <http://www.wsu.edu:8000/~dee/SHIA/REV.HTM>

¹⁸¹ *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty*. Gheissari, Ali and Vali Nasser. "Chapter Three: Revolution and War Fundamentalism, 1979–1989." [p. 94]. 2006. New York: Cambridge University Press.

crisis in three ways: diplomatically, economically, and militarily. In the first arena, he made diplomatic initiatives, seeking the intervention of foreign governments, particularly Muslim governments. They all failed. To press Iran economically, he froze several billion dollars in Iranian assets and halted oil purchases from Iran. This too proved useless.

Operation Eagle Claw

In April 1980, Carter gave the green light to attempt a covert military rescue mission. It ended in fiasco, with eight U.S. servicemen killed. Through the mediation of Algerian diplomats, the hostages were finally freed and sent home on 20 January 1981, several hours after Ronald Reagan's inauguration. The release of the hostages and change in administrations did nothing to improve U.S.-Iranian relations. Tehran remained defiant and hostile toward Washington while the new administration embraced a policy of coercion and containment.

As Jimmy Carter would later reflect after losing his reelection bid, in the age-old tradition of despots and demagogues, Khomeini pointed to the United States as the scapegoat for all of Iran's problems—economic, social, political, and otherwise. "Ayatollah Khomeini whipped popular discontent into rabid anti-Americanism."¹⁸²

The Iran Contra Affair

The pattern of bilateral recrimination was broken briefly by revelations of a clandestine arrangement whereby the U.S. and the Islamic Republic traded arms for hostages held by militants in Lebanon. Money was then funneled through Tehran to help rebels fighting the Marxist government of Nicaragua. The arrangement became known as "Iran Contra" after the public learned of its existence in 1986. Officials in the Reagan administration initially defended their actions on the grounds that the arrangement aided moderates within the Iranian government. This in turn begged a number of questions, among them whether Washington could identify moderates within the government and determine this arrangement was in fact benefiting them. Some believed it indicated the Ayatollah wanted a less confrontational relationship with Washington.¹⁸³



U.S. Government photo
Reagan meets with aides on the Iran-Contra Affair

Tehran's incentive to enter into such an arrangement was largely based on its need to acquire spare parts for the American equipment left behind by the Shah in order to continue its war with Iraq. Simply put, the mullahs were motivated by the desire to prevail over Iraq. Iran Contra was viewed from the Iranian side as a means of spreading their Shi'a revolution throughout the Sunni Muslim Middle East.

Seizing hostages proved valuable, and as soon as some were released, more were kidnapped in what the secretary of state termed "a hostage bazaar."¹⁸⁴ After the dealings came to



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Iran hostage crisis, 1979

¹⁸² Jimmy Carter Library and Museum. "The Hostage Crisis in Iran." 9 February 2000. <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/hostages.phtml>

¹⁸³ *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. Takeyh, Ray. (Chapter Four: Turning Points in U.S.-Iranian Relations.) [p. 106]. 2006. New York: Times Books.

¹⁸⁴ PBS. Wolf, Julie. "The Iran-Contra Affair." <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reagan/people/events/pande08.html>

light in Congressional hearings, many Americans came to believe, contrary to the Reagan administration's assertions, that arms had been traded for hostages. The unsavory nature of this exchange, as well as questions over its constitutionality, did a lot of damage to members of the Reagan administration.¹⁸⁵

Post-Khomeini Iran

The death of Khomeini in June 1989 offered the prospect of a new bilateral relationship. In an effort to improve relations between the two countries, the U.S. released \$567 million in Iranian assets frozen after the Islamic Revolution.¹⁸⁶ Despite this, the relationship between the two countries remained strained. The U.S. had increasing concerns over Iran's alleged sponsorship of terrorism and seeking to acquire nuclear arms,¹⁸⁷ and, in 1995 and 1996, President Clinton issued extensive trade sanctions against Iran.

The election of Mohammad Khatami, a moderate reformer, to the presidency in 1997, did not thaw bilateral relations. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, wielded veto power over all government actions, and many within and outside Iran dismissed Khatami as a figurehead who had little control over policy.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, Tehran's nuclear program, as well as its support for terrorist groups, continued to make it the target of U.S. sanctions, authorized by both executive order and congressional legislation. In 2001, the U.S. Congress renewed the *Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 (ILSA)*. Far from forcing Tehran to modify its behavior, these punitive measures have had the effect of increasing opportunities for profiteering among the political elite at the expense of the Iranian people.¹⁸⁹

Nuclear Crisis

In a State of the Union address in January 2002, President George W. Bush described Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil," warning of the increase in long-range missiles being developed in those countries.¹⁹⁰ The speech was received with anger in Iran and was condemned by both reformists and conservatives in the country. Later that year, construction on Iran's first nuclear reactor began in Bushehr, despite objections from the U.S.

In late 2003, the Iranian government agreed to halt uranium enrichment and allow inspection of its nuclear facilities.¹⁹¹ Unconvinced, the U.S. strengthened sanctions in early 2004. By November 2004, it appeared that Iran had halted some key nuclear activities,¹⁹² but with the

¹⁸⁵ The National Security Archive. "The Iran Contra Affair Twenty Years On." 24 November 2006.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/index.htm>

¹⁸⁶ The New York Times. Sciolino, Elaine. "Bush Hopes to Settle Iranian Assets Issue." 8 November 1989.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DEEDF1230F93BA35752C1A96F948260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>

¹⁸⁷ Congressional Record. "Iran Oil Sanctions Act of 1995 (Senate – December 18, 1995)." 1995.

http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1995_cr/s951218-iran.htm

¹⁸⁸ Washington Post. Wright, Robin. "Khatami Arrives as U.S. Weighs Sanctions on Iran." 5 September 2006.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/04/AR2006090400720.html>

¹⁸⁹ Tom Paine.com. Porteous, Tom. "Ahmadinejad: Cunning, Not Crazy." 13 January 2006.

http://www.tompaine.com/articles/2006/01/13/ahmadinejad_not_crazy_cunning.php

¹⁹⁰ The White House. "President Delivers State of the Union Address." 29 January 2002.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

¹⁹¹ PBS. "Iran's Nuclear Deal." 21 October 2003. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/july-dec03/iran_10-21.html

¹⁹² The New York Times. Sciolino, Elaine. "Iran Says It Suspends Uranium Enrichment Program." 22 November 2004.

http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/22/international/middleeast/22cnd-iran.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in June 2005, the retroactive nuclear policy and the suspension of uranium enrichment came to an end.¹⁹³

The Presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad

In contrast to reform-oriented Khatami, President Ahmadinejad has taken a more conservative approach in his domestic policies and, in terms of Iran's nuclear program, a confrontational stance in the face of international criticism. Defending the program as peaceful in nature, Ahmadinejad has refused to end uranium enrichment despite United Nations Security Council resolutions.¹⁹⁴



© Daniela Zaloman
Mahmud Ahmadinejad

In October 2007, the U.S. announced broad new sanctions against Iran—the toughest in almost 30 years. On 26 May 2008, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), issued a report that suggests possible “military dimensions” to Iran's nuclear plans.¹⁹⁵

Foreign Relations

Israel

President Ahmadinejad garnered international headlines in 2005 when he called for the eradication of Israel. The resounding condemnation spurred him to declare the holocaust was a “myth.” These outbursts and the reaction they provoked have been interpreted as a means of reinvigorating the waning revolutionary spirit upon which the Islamic republic was founded. Anti-Israel posturing is also useful to Tehran's ongoing search for allies to offset U.S. power in the region.¹⁹⁶ Such bellicose posturings may play well on Arab streets, but they fuel apprehension among liberal and conservative Israelis. Likewise, they cause considerable unease in other Middle Eastern capitals where leaders fear such pronouncements signaled a return to an Iran operating outside international diplomatic norms.¹⁹⁷

Under Ahmadinejad's predecessor, Iran had in fact moved closer to Arab nations. In 2002 at the Arab League meeting, Khatami endorsed Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's peace resolution calling for collective Arab recognition of Israel if it withdrew from the occupied territories. It is inconceivable to experts that Khatami could have endorsed this land for peace proposal in the



© Guy Haimovitch
Landscape in Israel

¹⁹³ Global Security. Weapons of Mass Destruction. “Ahmadinejad: Gov't firm to restore nations' full nuclear rights.” 11 April 2005. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2006/iran-060411-irna06.htm>

¹⁹⁴ Federation of American Scientists. CRS Report for Congress. Hassan, Hussein D. “Iran: Profile and Statements of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.” 16 January 2007. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22569.pdf>

¹⁹⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency. “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007) and 1803 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” 26 May 2008. <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2008/gov2008-15.pdf>

¹⁹⁶ Foreign Affairs. Nasr, Vali and Ray Takeyh. “The Costs of Containing Iran.” January/February 2008.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080101faessay87106-p10/vali-nasr-ray-takeyh/the-costs-of-containing-iran.html>

¹⁹⁷ *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. Takeyh, Ray. “Chapter Eight: Israel and the Politics of Terrorism. [p. 213].” 2006. New York: Times Books.

absence of Ayatollah Khamenei's blessing. It was the first time Tehran endorsed a set of diplomatic terms to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹⁹⁸

Armenia

Iran has established strong relations with Armenia. The newly configured national borders wrought by the dissolution of the U.S.S.R gave the two countries a set of mutual interests despite their obvious differences. Armenia, in short, provides Iran with a transportation route to Russia and Europe. Iran offers Armenia an outlet in the face of continuous trade-route blockades from Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as a source of energy.¹⁹⁹ Interestingly, this close relationship between Armenia and Iran has not prevented Armenia from becoming a leading recipient of U.S. economic assistance on a per capita basis.²⁰⁰

Iraq

Since its establishment in 1979, one of the Islamic Republic's main foreign policy concerns has been its neighbor, Iraq. The tension centered on the widely different character of the two governments: Iraq was ruled by a secular Sunni strongman while the Islamic Revolution brought a Shi'a-inspired theocratic republic to power in Iran. The two neighbors fought an eight-year border war which proved costly to both sides. Throughout the 1990s, when both countries were subject to a policy of dual containment from Washington, Tehran and Baghdad continued to view each other as the greatest source of insecurity.²⁰¹

The overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003 was certainly a cause for celebration in Tehran. The establishment of a democracy should have been a welcome development as well, since a majority of Iraqis are Shi'ites. While pan-Shiism does not exist nor is there a leader who can speak for adherents regardless of national origin, a distinctive Shi'a variant of Islamic law and religious practices has evolved over the past 1,400 years.²⁰²

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Malaki, although a Shi'ite, has forged consensus with the Sunni minority and U.S. authorities. In doing so, he has had to make compromises which have made his Iranian neighbors very uncomfortable. What Tehran may fear most, however, is the emergence of a Shi'ite base of power in Iraq. This could serve as an ideological rival to Iran, offering an alternative to Iran's clerical-dominated form of government.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ Common Dreams News Center. Porter, Gareth. "Iran Proposal to U.S. Offered Peace with Israel." 25 May 2006. <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/0525-05.htm>

¹⁹⁹ Eurasianet, Eurasia Insight. Khachatryan, Haroutiun. "Iran-Armenia Ties Look Promising, Though Obstacles Remain Steep." 2 February 2002. <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav022002.shtml>

²⁰⁰ Eurasianet, Business and Economics. Danielyan, Emil. "U.S. Concerned by Armenia's Energy Ties with Iran." 21 June 2007. <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav062107a.shtml>

²⁰¹ Washington Quarterly. Ehteshami, Anoushirvan. "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam." Autumn 2003. http://www.twq.com/03autumn/docs/03autumn_ehteshami.pdf

²⁰² Foreign Affairs. Nasr, Vali. "When the Shiites Rise." July/August 2006. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060701faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html>

²⁰³ U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report. Fuller, Graham. "Islamist Politics in Iraq After Saddam Hussein." August 2003. <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr108.html>

Afghanistan

Iran was not on good terms with the Sunni Taliban government in Afghanistan, which relied on funding from terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda to remain in power. The Taliban also routinely massacred members of Afghanistan's Shi'a minority. This prompted over one million Afghan refugees to seek refuge in Iran.²⁰⁴ Since the overthrow of the regime in 2001, Tehran has supported the government under President Hamid Karzai, but wishes to diminish U.S. influence in its neighborhood. A weak Afghan state cannot be a strong partner for the U.S. in any action against Iran.



DoD photo
Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan

Accordingly, Tehran has backed a number of different actors, including the Taliban, as well as Sunni Tajik and Pashtun-organized opposition groups.²⁰⁵ In addition, Iran has deported Afghani refugees, even those who have acquired temporary residence status in Iran, on short notice and in large numbers.²⁰⁶ This puts pressure on Kabul as the government is hard-pressed to provide employment opportunities for returnees. Finally, Iran has exploited tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan.²⁰⁷

However, offering the only other transit trade route for landlocked Afghanistan gives Tehran a lot of leverage and explains the Karzai government's insistence that Iran is "a helper," despite Washington's strong disagreement.²⁰⁸ This, however, has proved to be a two-way street: the resurgence in Afghan poppy cultivation has had an impact on Iran, which has become a transit route for heroin destined for the European market. Addicts in Iran purportedly number about three million.²⁰⁹

Pakistan

Historically, Iran and Pakistan have enjoyed a close relationship. They have no territorial disputes and were both aligned with the U.S. during the Cold War. On an informal basis, Iranians tended to treat Pakistan dismissively, comparing the ancient civilization of Persia to Pakistan's tribal society.²¹⁰ The fact that Pakistan is a predominantly Sunni country while Iran is a Shi'a state only assumed importance after the establishment of the Islamic Republic.²¹¹

²⁰⁴ International Peace Research Institute. "Afghan Refugees in Iran: From Refugee Emergency to Migration Management." 16 June 2004. <http://www.cmi.no/pdf/?file=/afghanistan/doc/CMI-PRIO-AfghanRefugeesInIran.pdf>

²⁰⁵ Council for Foreign Relations. Beehner, Lionel. "Is Iran Abetting the Taliban?" 14 June 2007.

http://www.cfr.org/publication/13578/is_iran_abetting_the_taliban.html

²⁰⁶ Christian Science Monitor. Sappenfield, Mark. "Is Iran Meddling in Afghanistan?" 8 August 2007.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0808/p06s01-wosc.html>

²⁰⁷ Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor. Tahir, Mohammed. "Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan." 18 January 2008.

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370239>

²⁰⁸ New York Times. Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "Bush Differs with Karzai on Iran." 7 August 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/07/washington/07prexy.html>

²⁰⁹ Council on Foreign Relations. Beehner, Lionel. "Afghanistan's Role in Iran's Drug Problem." 14 September 2006.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/11457/>

²¹⁰ Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor. Abedin, Mahan. "Iran: Understanding the Relationship with Pakistan and Al Qaeda." 9 September 2004.

http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=400&issue_id=3065&article_id=2368484

²¹¹ Asia Times, South Asia. Ramachandran, Sudha. "'Brothers' in Arms." 18 March 2005.

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/south_asia/gc18df06.html

Islamabad's support of the Sunni Taliban was, however, a source of friction in the late 1990s. In 2001, Pakistan officially withdrew support of the Taliban, and bilateral relations between the two countries have improved. They are currently in negotiation over an oil and gas pipeline between their countries and India. The U.S. has expressed concern that Pakistan might pass nuclear technology to Iran.²¹² Yet Iran is apprehensive about Pakistan's long-term stability as well as the prospect that a Sunni fundamentalist government might come to power in its nuclear neighbor.



Turkey

Both Turkey and Iran can claim long histories of statehood and imperial rule, a characteristic unique to these two nations. They also share a history of cultural exchange. The Persian language was used by Turkey's literati, while ethnic Turks exercised authority over present-day Iran for long periods because it was part of the Ottoman Empire.²¹³ Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the relationship has been complicated by Turkey's official secularism and Iran's status as an Islamic state.

The abrupt dissolution of the U.S.S.R. left Iran and Turkey scrambling for influence over the rich energy resources in the Central Asian and Caucasian states.²¹⁴ The two governments have become important trading partners with Turkey serving as a major transit route for goods shipped between Iran and Europe.²¹⁵ Iranian tourists can visit Turkey without a visa and it has become a popular destination for citizens of the Islamic Republic.

Turkmenistan

Relations between Ashgabat and Tehran have been good since Turkmenistan became an independent state in 1991.²¹⁶ Given the importance of Turkmenistan as a source of natural gas as well as its strategic location, Tehran is no doubt heartened that the U.S. has been unable to make Turkmenistan which practices a policy of strict neutrality, a closer ally.²¹⁷ Iran imports gas from Turkmenistan, and an abrupt cut-off in December 2007 was taken as a sign that bilateral relations were not as good as they appeared. However, the cutoff was due merely to a price dispute.²¹⁸

²¹² Heritage Foundation, Congressional Testimony of Lisa Curtis. "U.S. Policy and Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Containing Threats and Encouraging Regional Security." 6 July 2007.
<http://www.heritage.org/Research/asiaandthepacific/tst062707.cfm>

²¹³ Middle Eastern Quarterly. Gunter, Michael. "Turkey and Iran Face Off in Kurdistan." March 1998.
<http://www.meforum.org/article/384>

²¹⁴ Radio Free Europe. Esfandiari, Golnaz. "Central Asia: Iran, Turkey Struggle to Influence Region." 25 October 2005.
<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/10/B974274F-CE72-4859-B2C4-605CE58EBFE8.html>

²¹⁵ South Asian Analysis Group. Singh, Gajendra. "Turkey & Iran Coming Closer Together." 3 August 2004.
<http://www.southasiananalysis.org/papers11/paper1077.html>

²¹⁶ Radio Free Europe. Saidazimova, Gulnoza. "Turkmenistan: Iranian President Pays First Visit to Ashgabat." 24 July 2006.
<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/07/EFDE2475-A5D7-440C-A028-9E46C10C082C.html>

²¹⁷ The Current. Rosen, Armin. "Obscure Flashpoint Tests U.S. Policy." Winter 2007.
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/current/articles/spring2008/obscure-international-flashpoint.html>

²¹⁸ Radio Free Liberty. Pannier, Bruce. "Turkmenistan/Iran: Good Relations Take Turn for the Worse." 15 January 2008.
<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/01/AE26970F-E11F-4AC8-A792-3C336FEBE5DC.html>

Azerbaijan

Iran's relations with Azerbaijan are complicated by the fact that Iran has an Azeri population in its northwest corner, also known as "Southern Azerbaijan," totaling 15 million. This is almost double the total population of Azerbaijan. After war broke out in the Nagorno-Karabakh disputed territory of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988, Iran remained neutral despite its own citizen's support for the Azerbaijanis, (fellow Shi'a Muslims), against the Armenian Christian "infidels." Considered from Tehran's perspective, siding with the Azeris could precipitate calls for unification between Azerbaijan and "Southern Azerbaijan" in Iraq. The two have been separated since the 19th century by the Persian and Ottoman Empires.²¹⁹

Azerbaijan became independent when the U.S.S.R. was disbanded in 1991. This was a development that could hardly have been greeted with enthusiasm in Tehran, however. Its new neighbor state to the north posed a challenge to Iran's own economic interests as an energy exporter. Baku has negotiated deals opposed by Tehran, as well as Moscow, which has brought Western investment into the region.²²⁰ Azerbaijan, in short, has the potential to accumulate significant wealth. This owes to its large hydrocarbon deposits, subject to satisfactory division of drilling rights in the Caspian Sea, and relatively small population. Iran's economy, by contrast, remains in a state of stagnation as a result of the eight-year conflict with Iraq as well as U.S.-imposed sanctions and a high rate of population growth.²²¹ This led Iran to move closer to Armenia, Azerbaijan's primary nemesis.

Iranian Armed Forces and Police

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the new government, under Ayatollah Khomeini, inherited the Shah's army and created the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to protect the new Islamic state from both internal and external threats. Estimated to be 125,000-strong, the IRGC (*Pasadaran*) is a military force with naval, air, and ground components, similar to those of the conventional Iranian military.

Although there are some infantry units, most IRGC forces are trained and equipped to respond to internal security threats which fall into the realm of political opposition, not terrorism. They exercise authority over the *basij* (mobilization of the oppressed) and other paramilitary groups in the event of war. The *Quds* Force (Jerusalem Brigade),²²² are an elite unit within the ICRG. It conducts special operations outside the country and offers training to non-Iranian groups, numbering approximately 800 people.²²³



© K. Adl
Iranian soldiers enjoying a day off in Tehran

²¹⁹ Caucasian Review of International Affairs. Gresh, Geoffrey. "Coddling the Caucasus: Iran's Strategic Relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia [p. 3]." Winter 2006. http://cria-online.org/jurnal_1/Coddling%20the%20Caucasus%20by%20Geoffrey%20Gresh.pdf

²²⁰ Harvard University, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations: Challenges and Prospects (Event Summary)." 1999. http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/12750/azerbaijan_iran_relations.html

²²¹ Cornell Caspian Consulting. Cornell, Svante. "Iranian Azerbaijan: A Brewing Hotspot." No date. <http://www.cornellcaspian.com/pub2/0411IRAN.pdf>

²²² Quds is an Islamic concept in both Shi'a and Sunni Islam. Quds comes from the root word Q-D-S "sacred" and is the name for Jerusalem—*Quds al-muqadasa* (Jerusalem the sacred).

²²³ Radio Free Europe. "Iran: Expert Discusses Iran's Quds Force and U.S. Charges Concerning Iraq." 16 February 2007. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/2/36B123CE-693B-448E-BF7D-A541E2A7BD12.html>

The IRGC is also a dominant player in Iran's military industrial complex. The links between it and Iran's nuclear program are so close that its leaders have been identified in UN Security Council Resolutions.²²⁴ Although the current President, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, is a former Revolutionary Guard, he does not control the armed forces.²²⁵ That authority rests with the Supreme Leader, a position held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since 1989.

Moreover, the IRGC has become a progressively important political force. Members of the IRGC gained seats in the March 2008 parliamentary elections. While Ayatollah Khomeini warned against members of the military holding public office, it is a trend his successor Khamenei has encouraged.²²⁶

The police force is under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. Numbering 40,000, the police are responsible for internal security, including rapid response to unauthorized political gatherings, as well as border protection to prevent unauthorized entry. In 2003, some 400 women joined the police force, the first female recruits since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.²²⁷

Domestic Dissident Groups

Ethnic nationalism, which drove a number of conflicts after the break-up of the U.S.S.R., was seen as a potential source of destabilization in Iran, where ethnic Persians make up only 51% of the population. Yet such tensions have not materialized into any type of movement that threatened government power; even the Kurds, proud Sunni Muslims who face discrimination by the Shiite Islamic government, have a much better relationship with the dominant ethnic group than elsewhere.²²⁸ Kurdish-language publications have long been allowed as long as they do not promote separatism. Iranian Kurds have registered interest in greater autonomy since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, which gave Iraqi Kurds greater freedom.²²⁹ When incidents of ethnic unrest do occur in Iran, meddling outsiders are accused of being behind it.²³⁰



© James Gordon
Kurdish Peshmerga fighters near the Iran-Iraq frontier

The Emergence of Shi'a Power

Iran's ambition is to be respected as a major power by other Muslim governments in the Middle East. This is complicated by the fact that it is a predominately Shi'a society. While 90% percent of Iranians are Shia, close to 50% of inhabitants in the arc which runs from Lebanon to Pakistan

²²⁴ Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces." 16 August 2007.

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/070816_cordesman_report.pdf

²²⁵ PBS, Frontline Terror. "The Structure of Power in Iran." 2005.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/govt.html>

²²⁶ Foreign Policy in Focus. Feffer, John and Danny Hosein. "Dealing with Iran's Hardliners." 4 April 2008.

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/5123>

²²⁷ BBC News. Eeles, Miranda. "Women Set to Join Iran Police." 4 January 2003.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/middle_east/2628265.stm

²²⁸ Reason. Totten, Michael. "The Next Iranian Revolution." October 2007. <http://www.reason.com/news/show/122023.html>

²²⁹ Radio Free Liberty. Recknagel, Charles. "Kurdish Culture Begins to Flourish in Kurdistan Region." 9 December 2005.

<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/12/D30F99A2-B113-41E9-A046-59AAE08A1440.html>

²³⁰ Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Analysis. Zambelis, Chris. "Iran's Challenges From Within: An Overview of Ethno-Sectarian Unrest." August 2007. <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373589>

are adherents of Shia Islam as well, adding up with other populations to some 140 million people in all.²³¹ Other states that have Shia minorities fear a rising Iran will incite their own Shia citizens to demand greater equality with the Sunni majority.

The origins of the Shi'a revival lie in the Iranian revolution. It was this event that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power and also made Hezbollah's subsequent inroads in Lebanon possible. Tehran now sees a chance to extend Shi'a influence into other countries. Iran, in short, sees itself as the protector-defender of all Shi'a in the world. This in turn explains its interference in neighboring countries with large Shi'a minorities. Such interference has clearly rattled its neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia. The concern extends beyond Riyadh, however. "King Abdullah of Jordan has warned that a new 'Shiite crescent' stretching from Beirut to Tehran might cut through the Sunni-dominated Middle East."²³²

Sponsor of Terrorism

Tehran has consistently denied that it supports terrorism. It hastened to condemn the attack against the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Yet Iran has been a benefactor of both Hamas and Hizbollah, political movements in the Levant. *Hizbollah* (Party of God), a Shi'a political movement based in Lebanon, has close ties to Iran. Hizbollah emerged as a powerful group during Lebanon's civil war (1975–1990). It is an umbrella organization for radical Shi'ite organizations wanting to turn Lebanon into an Islamic republic modeled on Iran.²³³ Hamas is a political movement in the Gaza strip, originally funded in the 1980s by Israel as an alternative to Yasser Arafat's Al-Fatah movement. It has grown into the largest militant movement in Palestine, even winning the majority of the seats in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council.²³⁴

Hizbollah is known or suspected to have been involved in numerous anti-U.S. terrorist attacks. These include the suicide truck bombing of the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, and the U.S. Embassy annex in Beirut in September 1984. Elements of the group were responsible for the kidnapping and detention of U.S. and other Western hostages in Lebanon. Hizbollah has set its sights beyond the Middle East as well; the group carried out an attack on the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992, and remains a principal suspect in the 1994 bombing of the Israeli Cultural Center in Buenos Aires. According to the Terrorism Knowledge Base, since 1982 Hizbollah has been responsible for nearly 200 attacks which have resulted in more than 800 fatalities.²³⁵

While Iran does not control or even dominate Hizbollah, it has provided it with financial and material support. In addition to supplying rockets, IRGC forces that include members of The

²³¹ Shi'a Muslims make up the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and, in the view of some, Yemen. There are also large Shi'a communities in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. BBC News (International Version). "Quick Guide: Sunnis and Shias." 11 December 2006.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6213248.stm

²³² Foreign Affairs. Nasr, Vali. "When the Shiites Rise." July/August 2006.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060701faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html>

²³³ Council on Foreign Relations. "Hezbollah (a.k.a Hizbollah, Hizbu'llah)." 14 February 2008.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9155/>

²³⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "Hamas." 8 June 2007. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8968/>

²³⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. "Hezbollah (a.k.a Hizbollah, Hizbu'llah)." 14 February 2008.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9155/>

Quds Force have been deployed to Lebanon for some time.²³⁶ Iran has benefitted from Hezbollah's strikes, which distract international attention from its own nuclear program.

What's Ahead: Iran as a Nuclear Power?

Under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nations have the right to enrich fuel for civil nuclear power, subject to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). While Tehran has consistently claimed its program is for peaceful purposes, capability is what counts, not intent. Iran is in the process of developing a complete fuel-nuclear cycle that will bring it close to full-scale weapons manufacturing capability.²³⁷ As a result of this, Iran is under both UN and U.S. sanctions.



© Hamed Saber
Natanz Nuclear Facility, Iran

Within Tehran there are three major camps on how to deal with outside pressure on their government. The reformists controlled the parts of the government filled by elections during the 1997–2005 tenure of President Mohammad Khatami. They believe there is little to lose by acceding to the UN Security Council's demand that it temporarily suspend nuclear enrichment activities. Conservative pragmatists, associated with former president Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, support a combination of toughness and flexibility. This means negotiating with other governments to secure the best deal for Iran while minimizing the impact from trade and other sanctions.²³⁸ The current President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, in contrast, prefers to publicly dismiss threats from other governments. As the current office holder, he also has his own career interests at heart; international criticism helps mobilize domestic opinion behind him in the run-up to his reelection in 2009.²³⁹

A complicating factor, from the vantage point of Washington, was the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE)'s conclusion, released in December 2007. The NIE reported that Iran had ceased work on designing a nuclear weapon in 2003. Yet questions remain on how far Iran got in this endeavor. The Iranians are currently enriching uranium fuel and, with a decent warhead design, will have the capability to produce a weapon. Fuel is typically the limiting factor for governments trying to develop nuclear weapons.²⁴⁰

Such a finding from a respected source makes it harder to get other governments to agree to harsher sanctions, raising the specter of a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, a response advocated in some quarters. It is an option that has been discussed for some time.²⁴¹ Yet the

²³⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony. "Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon." 15 July 2006. http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060715_hezbollah.pdf

²³⁷ Brookings Institute. Gordon, Phillip. "Iran Sanctions and Regional Security." 23 October 2007. <http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2007/1023iran.aspx>

²³⁸ New York Review of Books. Rodenbeck, Max. "An American in Iran." 17 January 2008. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20930>

²³⁹ New York Review of Books. Rodenbeck, Max. "An American in Iran." 17 January 2008. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20930>

²⁴⁰ New York Times. Broad, William. "Looks Who's Tough on Iran Now." 1 June 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/weekinreview/01broad.html?ref=weekinreview>

²⁴¹ Monterey Institute of International Studies, James Martin Center for Non-Proliferation Studies. Salama, Sammy and Karen Ruster. "A Preemptive Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities: Possible Consequences." 12 August 2004. <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/week/040812.htm>

unknowns are also significant. In retaliation Iran could harm Israel, foment Shi'a unrest in Saudi Arabia, and disrupt America's supply of energy.²⁴² The prospect of radioactive fall-out is a serious concern. Moreover, the use of force, even a bombing campaign of short duration, could cause the price of oil to surge and rattle world financial markets.

From a different perspective it has been argued that a military campaign would alienate pro-American elements within both Iranian society and the government, causing them to rally around the hard-line leadership.²⁴³ Those who make this argument believe that Iran's economic woes and a sizeable segment of its citizenry's disillusionment with the fruits of the Islamic Revolution together offer fertile ground for negotiation and a chance to move away from continued brinkmanship.²⁴⁴ In sum, the only point of consensus is that Iran's nuclear weapons program may well pose the biggest security challenge to the new American presidential administration.²⁴⁵

²⁴² U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute. Sokolski, Henry and Patrick Clawson. "Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran." October 2005. <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub629.pdf>

²⁴³ Johns Hopkins University, SAISPHERE. Nafisi, Azar. "Who Will Help the Iranian People?" 2007. <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/pressroom/publications/saisphere/2007/index.htm>

²⁴⁴ Foreign Policy in Focus. Disney, Patrick and Danny Hosein. "Dealing with Iran's Hardliners." 4 April 2008. <http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/5123>

²⁴⁵ University of Southern California, Election 2008. Karl, David. "The Next President's Nuclear Challenge." <http://election2008.usc.edu/2008/05/next-presidents-nuclear-challenge.html>