

Modern Iranian History



Map from the CIA World Factbook

Basic Facts about Iran:

Iran, previously known in the West as Persia, is a country in western Asia, bordering on Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan (previously Russia/the Soviet Union), as well as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey. Iran also borders several bodies of water: the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the south. The 18th largest country in the world, Iran has rugged mountains, deserts, forests, and fertile plains. Its population is now over 80 million people, who speak a variety of languages. Persian (an Indo-European language distantly related to English) is the official and most widely-spoken language, but there are large Turkic, Kurdish, Arab, and tribal minorities. Most people are Shi'a Muslim.

History:

Archeological evidence shows that the area of today's Iran has been inhabited for more than 100,000 years, and written records date back several thousand years. In more recent times, the 7th century CE, Muslims conquered Iran though Iran adopted the Shi'ite form of the faith. Despite linguistic and religious differences, there was a great deal of cultural interaction and sharing of ideas between Persians and Arabs in the medieval period, which is when the Persian language adopted the Arabic alphabet. During the Islamic Golden Age (medieval times), the Muslim world was far more advanced in knowledge and political power than Europe; however, the political balance of power began to shift in the 17th century.

By the 19th century, Persia was a pawn in the “Great Game” between the Russian Empire, bordering Persia to the north, and Great Britain, expanding from India and from the Persian Gulf. In 1813 and 1828, Persia lost extensive territories to Russia, and it soon lost control of its natural resources to Western countries. The last straw was the 1890 Tobacco Concession, in which the Iranian king (or “shah” in Persian) gave a British company control over Iran’s tobacco exports. There were large public protests in Iranian cities and a widespread boycott of tobacco products. It is interesting that leaders of the protests included members of the Muslim clergy (the ulama) and small businessmen, a pattern which would continue over the next century. Many people began to call for limits on the shah’s power. The Iranian government was forced to give up the Tobacco Concession in 1892.

By 1905, Iranians were again protesting the excesses of their government and its failure to stand up to Russian and British pressures. The Constitutional Revolution, widespread public protests, strikes, and sit-ins, again supported by the ulama and shopkeepers, aimed at limiting the power of the shah through the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, a form of government which would, presumably, make the country stronger. Britain and Russia violently suppressed the movement, signing the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 dividing Persia into spheres of influence. In the meantime, oil was discovered in Persia, which would make control of the country even more important to foreign powers.

In 1921, a man named Reza Khan became the most important figure in the Iranian government; by 1925 he had taken the title Reza Shah and established the last dynasty in the country’s history. In the 1920s and 1930s, Reza Shah sought to modernize Iran: reorganizing the government administration, forcibly settling the nomads within the country’s borders, building the military by introducing universal conscription (the requirement that all men serve two years in the military), increasing the number of schools, and making Persian a mandatory state language. Reza Shah also made great changes in the status of women: opening schools for girls and outlawing the wearing of the veil (chador). Some people felt he was changing things too fast; others felt there was not enough freedom. The ulama – and many religious people who supported them – disliked that the shah was making Iran a *secular* state by taking over powers held by the religious leaders (for example, registering births) and by outlawing Islamic dress for women. However, it was the West that forced Reza Shah from power in 1941. Fearing that he was too pro-German (It was during World War II.), Great Britain, Russia, and the United States insisted that he abdicate and his son, Mohammad Reza, take his place.

During the reign of the last shah, Iran underwent tremendous changes. On the one hand, the country made rapid advances, becoming a country with a modern infrastructure, a strong military, and an industrial economy. On the other hand, many people resented that the rapid modernization left a big gap between the very rich and the very poor. Others disliked Iran’s dependence on the United States, which controlled the country’s politics (Iran, bordering on the Soviet Union, was an important U.S. ally in the Cold War.) and economy (The U.S. had taken control of Iran’s oil fields.). In 1951, Iranians carried out what was in effect a second movement toward democracy, bringing to power

a popular Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq. Mossadeq nationalized the oil fields and led the shah to leave the country. In August 1953, however, the U.S. organized a CIA *coup*, which overthrew the Mossadeq government and returned the shah to power. For the next 26 years, the shah ruled as an autocrat, violently suppressing any opposition. Many Iranians blamed the U.S. for this repression.

By 1977, frustrated by U.S. control and the repressive policies of their own government, Iranians started protesting. Weekly demonstrations grew massive, and the shah's efforts to stop them more violent. (Hundreds of peaceful demonstrators were killed on "Black Friday," September 9, 1978, alone.) By the end of 1978, several million people were demonstrating in cities across Iran, and armed conflict was beginning. In January 1979, ill with cancer, the shah left Iran for the last time. By February 1979, Iran was declared a republic. Soon the name was changed to "Islamic Republic," and a religious leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became Supreme Leader.

1979 begins a period of ill-will between the U.S. and Iran, which has lasted to the present day. People in Iran did not know the shah was sick, so when the U.S. government allowed him into the U.S., many assumed the U.S. was planning another coup to return him to power. Iranian militants then took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, holding 52 Americans hostage for the next 444 days. (To this day, the U.S. does not have an embassy in Iran, nor do the two countries have diplomatic relations.)

Before Iran had a chance to establish a stable government, Iraq attacked, beginning an eight-year-long war (1980-1988), which was the bloodiest war between two countries since World War II. Approximately one million Iranians and Iraqis, mostly young men, lost their lives. The U.S., angry over the Iranian taking of hostages in the U.S. Embassy, mostly supported Iraq - though providing weapons to both sides.

Since the war, Iran has experienced change but at a slower rate than some people want. Relations with the U.S. remain bad, especially amid allegations that Iran is developing a nuclear weapons program.

Women's lives have been especially affected by the politics of the Islamic Republic. They are required to wear Islamic dress in public – loose-fitting clothing and a veil covering the hair (but not the face). Revolutionary Guards strictly enforced the dress code. Over time, there has been some relaxation; women frequently go out in public with some hair visible (bangs, for example). Women have less legal rights in family law (initiating divorce proceedings, child custody) and are not allowed to travel abroad without a husband's permission. Couples – even married ones – may not hold hands in public, and even in private homes, mixed parties, in which women are unveiled and dance western-style, are not allowed. (Of course, alcohol is always forbidden.) Women are not allowed to attend public sporting events, and if they play sports themselves, they must wear uniforms that cover everything except their face, hands, and feet.

Nonetheless, women in Iran play an important role in society. They drive cars, attend universities in greater numbers than men, and hold important jobs – and even political office – throughout the country.

Overall, Iran is a complicated country in which modernity and traditional values coexist (and sometimes clash). In many ways Iran is an outlier in the world: poised geographically and culturally between East and West, a Middle Eastern country that is not Arab, a Muslim country that is not Sunni. Iran's size and economic/political power insure that it will continue to play an important role in world affairs.