

The Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran is an Islamic country, but not an Arab country. About two thirds of the Iranian people speak Farsi or some Persian dialect and one fifth a Turkish dialect called Azari. The country, which stands on the high Iranian Plateau, contains diverse ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groups. It covers an area larger than 600,000 square miles.

1. THE EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM ON PERSIA (IRAN):

During the nineteenth century Iran suffered from the territorial ambitions of the great colonial powers. From the time of Empress Catherine the Great (1762-1796) of Russia until the mid-nineteenth century, Persia and Russia were involved in diplomatic maneuvers and wars. Persia bargained with Napoleon for protection against Russia, but after Napoleon abandoned his plans for the Middle East, Persia lost its chief defender. In the following decades Russia seized several Persian provinces. Many of these annexed provinces became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) after 1917. Persia also lost its rights to use the Caspian Sea.

To compensate for their losses to the Russians, the Persians claimed Afghan territory and attempted to seize parts of the country. But the British did not want Persia to take over any part of Afghanistan because Britain could not permit any nation outside its empire to control the mountain passes to India. To forestall the loss of Afghan territory, the British themselves occupied parts of the country and forced Persia to surrender its claims. With Afghanistan as a base the British were able to restrict Russian penetration of Persia. London's policy was to keep both countries free, but dependent upon Britain.

Concerned with the growing strength of Germany, Britain and Russia agreed to settle their differences over Persia in 1907. Persia was divided into three spheres of influence. Russia was to have a free hand in developing its economic interests in the north. Southern Persia was to become a British sphere of influence. The area between was to remain a neutral zone.

Southern Persia's value to Great Britain was underscored by the discovery of oil. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company formed in 1908, mostly with British capital, became an instrument for British influence in southern Persia. Soon after the discovery of oil, Persia became the chief supplier of fuel to the British navy. Persia thus became important to Britain as Egypt had earlier because of the Suez Canal.

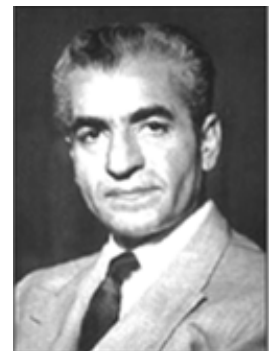
During World War II, Iran was occupied by the British and by Russians because it provided a route for Allied supplies to Russia. After the war, the intervention of the United Nations and the United States was needed to persuade the Soviets to evacuate the northern provinces which they had taken over in 1942.

2. THE PAHLAVI DYNASTY:

Reza Khan, a former army colonel seized power in 1923 and made himself **shah** in 1925, changing his name from Khan to Pahlavi, after an ancient Persian dynasty. Like Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, the shah was impressed with the material progress of the West. He too attempted to update his country by building factories, railways, and hospitals. Reza Shah also wanted to "modernize" the outward appearance of his subjects. Women were ordered to discard the veil and their traditional shapeless black garb. Reza Shah's efforts to achieve modernization, however, met with resistance. Conservative religious leaders claimed that these efforts threatened Islam. The tribal chiefs feared losing control over their followers. The wealthy landowners feared that their ownership of vast tracts of land was endangered.

But during World War II, Reza Shah admired the Fascists and Nazis and he was deposed by the Allies, who occupied his country. His son and successor, **Mohammed Reza Pahlavi** nearly lost his throne when nationalists threatened to take over the government. However, with the backing of the United States, the Iranian army managed to keep the shah in power.

During the 1960s the shah initiated a number of economic and social reforms aimed at improving living conditions among the impoverished peasants. These efforts were taken despite opposition from groups that had opposed his father, and from nationalists who believed that their ruler was too closely identified with Western imperialism.



3. INCREASING OPPOSITION TO THE SHAH:

As opposition to the shah increased, his regime became more repressive. By the early 1970s the shah dominated the most important sectors of society—the army, the landed aristocracy, the wealthy merchants, and the government bureaucracy. The shah's secret police, the State Organization for Intelligence and Security known as **SAVAK** from the initials of its name in Farsi (the Persian language), arrested thousands of dissidents, many of whom were tortured in the shah's prisons. In 1979 **Amnesty International**, a private organization devoted to the fostering of human rights and the elimination of political repression, reported that Iran had the highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civil courts, and its "history of torture...is beyond belief."

Despite reform programs in agriculture, the expansion of industry, and the growth of the educational system, Iran still had many problems. Chief among them was that only a small percentage of the population seemed to benefit from the reform programs, which the shah called the "**White Revolution**." As one of the largest producers of oil in the Middle East, Iran used its oil revenues to develop its resources. But most projects were grandiose schemes that did little to raise the living conditions of the average peasant. It had the largest landholdings and owned many shares in the government's newly established industries, depositing Iran's profits in investments in Europe and the United States where the income from these investments was at the shah's private disposal.

The shah also aspired to make Iran the dominant power in the Middle East. He invested billions of dollars in the most modern sophisticated weaponry, most of it acquired from the United States. His army was thought to be the most powerful in the Gulf region. As the backbone of the shah's regime, it was considered capable of protecting the shah's government against any uprising.

Between 1963 and 1979, the Shah spent billions of oil dollars on military weapons. The real price of military strength was the loss of popular support. But by the late 1970s it was becoming increasingly evident that neither the reforms of the White Revolution nor the repression of SAVAK could stem the rising tide of discontent. Mass demonstrations demanding either major reforms or removal of the shah erupted throughout the country. Neither the army nor the police could stop them. Workers in the oil fields resented the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Students and other intellectuals objected to censorship and restraints on the press and intellectual life. The nationalists opposed Iran's growing dependence on the United States for arms and political support. Middle class entrepreneurs (risk-taking business men) feared competition from the new government-controlled industries. Finally, clergy of the Shi'ia sect, a majority of Iran's Muslim population, resented the shah's efforts toward modernization.

4. THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION:



Iran's Shi'ia clerics traditionally were regarded by villagers and the poor as defenders of the oppressed against the ruling powers. The Shi'ia clergy were particularly hostile to the shah because of his attempts at forced modernization and his schemes to return Iran's calendar, flag, and other national symbols to representations of pre-Islamic ancient Persia. The most prominent opposition leader was the **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini**, the highest ranking cleric in Iran's Islamic establishment. Khomeini, who had been exiled by the shah during the 1960s and was living in France, was still looked to for leadership by the various dissident factions in Iran.

In 1978 the shah was no longer able to keep his government together. Neither was he able to deal with the displays of civil disobedience that swept through the country. Unable to sustain economic progress and unwilling to expand democratic freedoms, the Shah's regime collapsed in revolution. On January 16, 1979, the Shah fled Iran, never to return. Several days after their departure, Khomeini returned from France and formed a Council of the Islamic Revolution, which took control of the country.

5. ESTABLISHMENT OF A THEOCRACY:

During the next few months, Iran's Shi'ia leaders established a **theocracy** (a government ruled by or subject to religious authority). First they set up revolutionary tribunals (courts) to conduct secret trials and executions of former officials, military officers, SAVAK agents, and associates of the shah. They introduced a new Islamic constitution that gave priority to Muslim law and institutions. A 12-member Council of Guardians

that was led by the Ayatollah was put in charge of the government to assure that all legislation complied with Shi'ia principles.

Within a year, opponents of the theocracy were weeded out, including many individuals and factions who had helped to overthrow the shah. Those no longer acceptable were Communists, socialists, secular nationalists, members of Kurdish political organizations, and even moderate Islamic republicans like Abdul Hasan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic. In 1981, Bani-Sadr, once one of Khomeini's closest advisers in exile, broke with Khomeini and fled to France.

6. THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE CRISIS—444 DAYS:

On November 4, 1979, 3,000 militants overran the U.S. Embassy in Teheran and captured 54 embassy staff members. Religious extremist and Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini praised their actions. The militants demanded that: the Shah, who ruled Iran for decades and was now seeking medical treatment in the West, be turned over to them for trial; the United States apologize for crimes against the Iranian people; and the Shah's assets be paid to them. These fifty-four American prisoners were held for more than a year; they suffered solitary confinement, beatings, and terrifying mock executions.

During the year of captivity, President Jimmy Carter, who had refused to return the Shah to Iran or apologize for past U.S. aid to his regime, was unable to gain the hostages' release through diplomatic means. He attempted to isolate Iran economically, freezing Iranian assets in the United States and urging other nations to sever trade ties to Iran. Jimmy Carter's standing in the opinion polls sank as the crisis continued. In desperation, he mounted a rescue raid which failed and embarrassed him. The political reaction led to congressional votes for increased military expenditures and a presidential election campaign issue that helped doom President Carter's reelection efforts. Jimmy Carter continued his intense efforts to free the hostages and finally succeeded in late 1980, too late to benefit his presidential election effort. In fact last minute delays, and perhaps deliberate stalling, prevented the hostages from actually being freed until some minutes after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated president.

7. IMPACT OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR:

The Iran-Iraq War permanently altered the course of Iraqi history. It strained Iraqi political and social life, and led to severe economic dislocations. Viewed from a historical perspective, the outbreak of hostilities in 1980 was, in part, just another phase of the ancient Persian-Arab conflict that had been fueled by twentieth-century border disputes. Many observers, however, believe that Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Iran was a personal miscalculation based on ambition and a sense of vulnerability. Saddam Hussein, despite having made significant strides in forging an Iraqi nation-state, feared that Iran's new revolutionary leadership would threaten Iraq's delicate Sunn-Shi'ia balance and would exploit Iraq's global-strategic vulnerabilities--Iraq's minimal access to the Persian Gulf, for example. In this respect, Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Iran has historical precedent; the ancient rulers of Mesopotamia, fearing internal strife and foreign conquest, also engaged in frequent battles with the peoples of the highlands.

The Iran-Iraq War was multifaceted and included religious schisms, border disputes, and political differences. Conflicts contributing to the outbreak of hostilities ranged from centuries-old Sunni-versus-Shi'ia and Arab-versus-Persian religious and ethnic disputes, to a personal animosity between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Above all, Iraq launched the war in an effort to consolidate its rising power in the Arab world and to replace Iran as the dominant Persian Gulf state. Phebe Marr, a noted analyst of Iraqi affairs, stated that "the war was more immediately the result of poor political judgment and miscalculation on the part of Saddam Hussein," and "the decision to invade, taken at a moment of Iranian weakness, was Saddam's".

Attempts to introduce economic reforms were undercut by Iraq's attack on Iran in 1980 and the subsequent Gulf War that lasted until 1988. The fighting resulted in nearly a million casualties and the near bankruptcy of the country from the allocation of its oil revenues to the war effort. Another result was the beginnings of open opposition to the policies of the theocracy.

By the summer 1988 Iran peace proposal, and negotiations for a cease-fire, halted the fighting. But the cease-fire in the Gulf War did not end political repression in Iran. Reports from Amnesty International and the UN indicated the political situation in Iran was as repressive as it was during the shah's regime.

Casualty figures are highly uncertain, though estimates suggest more than one and a half million war and war-related casualties -- perhaps as many as a million people died, many more were wounded, and millions were made refugees. Iraq's victory was not without cost. The Iraqis suffered an estimated 375,000 casualties,

the equivalent of 5.6 million for a population the size of the United States. Another 60,000 were taken prisoner by the Iranians. Iran's losses may have included more than 1 million people killed or maimed. The war claimed at least 300,000 Iranian lives and injured more than 500,000, out of a total population which by the war's end was nearly 60 million.

At the end, virtually none of the issues which are usually blamed for the war had been resolved. When it was over, the conditions which existed at the beginning of the war remained virtually unchanged. Although Iraq won the war militarily, and possessed a significant military advantage over Iran in 1989, the 1991 Persian Gulf War reduced Iraq's capabilities to a point where a rough parity (equality) existed between Iran and Iraq--conditions similar to those found in 1980. The UN-arranged cease-fire merely put an end to the fighting, leaving two isolated states to pursue an arms race with each other, and with the other countries in the region. The Iraqi military machine -- numbering more than a million men with an extensive arsenal of chemical weapons, extended range Scud missiles, a large air force and one of the world's larger armies -- emerged as the premier armed force in the Persian Gulf region. In the Middle East, only the Israel Defense Force had superior capability.

On January 23, 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini was brought from Qom to Tehran to receive heart treatment. After thirty-nine days in hospital, he took up residence in the north Tehran suburb of Darband, and on April 22 he moved into a modest house in Jamaran, another suburb to the north of the capital. A closely guarded compound grew up around the house, and it was there that he spent the rest of his life as absolute ruler of Iran.

Ayatollah Khomeini, on June 3, 1989, after eleven days in hospital for an operation to stop internal bleeding, lapsed into a critical condition and died.

8. IRAN TODAY:

Swept into office by millions of Iranians chafing under the social constraints of radical Islam, **Mohammad Khatami** was elected the fifth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1997. Khatami, then a relatively unknown cleric, won by a landslide in Iran's 1997 presidential election, on the strength of promises to make Iran more democratic and improve its image abroad. But his bid for political reform is being spiked by the clerical establishment, which is dominated by conservatives. Khatami has never been and never will be truly in charge of the country's affairs. As president, he ranks second in the hierarchy of power. The supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei, has final say in all matters of state. Chief among the conservatives' tactics has been the repression of free speech (which caused student riots in Tehran in 1999).



Iranians reaffirmed their support for Mr. Khatami's goals by voting for his supporters in 2000's parliamentary polls and overwhelmingly for Mr. Khatami in the presidential election of June 2001. Now re-elected, Mr. Khatami faces a treacherous second term, which has led him to select a cabinet with an eye to avoiding confrontation. Though Iran criticized America's attack on Afghanistan it has been happy to see the Taliban destroyed. A friendly regime in Afghanistan could see some of the 2.4 million Afghans living in Iran going home.

President Mohammad Khatami has been trying to wrench politics and society out of the grip of Iran's highly conservative clerics. In his first term of office, he has failed to deliver. Those who voted for Mr Khatami, the 70% of the electorate who want radical reform of government, administration and the economy, are very frustrated.

Mr Khatami also promised, but has been unable to achieve, restrictions on the power of clerical institutions and hardline judiciary. He has faced strong resistance from the conservative clergy associated with the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei - the man at the top of Iran's political and religious power structure.

President Khatami, an advocate of gradual institutional reform in line with the Islamic constitution, has clear views on the nature of Islamic government, social justice, liberty, democracy, tolerance and good governance. His aims include curbing corruption and making the security and police forces more accountable. He also wants to improve relations with other countries, especially in the Arab world.

The Islamic Republic of Iran

Questions:

1. Why were both Russia and Great Britain interested in controlling Persia (Iran) in the 19c?
2. What role did Afghanistan play in Britain's 19c colonial goals in the Middle East?
3. Why did Reza Shah's efforts to modernize Iran meet with resistance?
4. Why did the United States support Reza Shah for so long?
5. Why was the new shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, despised by so many Iranians?
6. Which groups in Iran were the Shah's chief opponents?
7. What role did the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini play in toppling the Shah from power in 1979?
8. What is a theocracy? How was the new Islamic Republic of Iran a theocracy?
9. What caused the U. S. Embassy Hostage Crisis in 1979? What was the American response?
10. Why did Saddam Hussein invade Iran in 1980?
11. What were the long-term results of the Iran-Iraq War for both nations?
12. What changes in Iran were expected with the election for President of Muhammad Khatami in 1997? Have these changes occurred? If not, why not?