



Iran: Understanding the Enigma: A Historian's View+

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Most Americans came to identify Iran only as a result of a series of events that were negative and shocking to them--first an Islamic revolution culminating in the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in February 1979, and then the holding of hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran for 444 days, which ended on the day of President Reagan's inauguration in January, 1981. Since then relations have been bad. A unilateral embargo on economic relations was imposed by President Clinton in 1995.

Some hope for easing relations began with the election of the moderate president, Muhammad Khatami, in 1997. His friendly 1998 talk to Americans on CNN, along with growing visits and athletic relations, have improved attitudes on both sides. The U.S. embargo and freezing of Iranian assets remain. The United States is blocking construction of an oil pipeline from the Caspian area through Iran. The United States says Iran incites terrorism, opposes an Arab-Israeli settlement, and is building weapons of mass destruction. Iran argues that these charges are exaggerated.

Iran has long seen a series of great swings and variations in political, religious, and economic terms. If one took what seemed to be true of Iran at different dates one might have extremely different images. This applies particularly to the view of Iran from abroad. Among Americans, the dominant picture of Iran today is of a country ruled mainly by Islamic religious fanatics who force women to veil from top-

to-toe, sent thousands of young boys to their death in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, and support terrorism abroad.

If one goes back to the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi 1941-79, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant U.S. view was of a rapidly modernizing, secularizing society allied with U.S. values and policy objectives, except regarding autocracy. Earlier, under the Qajar dynasty 1796-1925, Iran was seen by Westerners as a very backward Oriental society with very different, often irrational values.

Historians know that an entire society does not change so rapidly from one condition to another. Examining Iranian history helps one better understand these apparent rapid transformations. Here we will look for some features of Iranian history that can help in doing so. Issues regarding the past are important in modern Iranian politics: hence we are not dealing with a dead past but with one constructed to give different political meanings by different groups. Iranian nationalists, who include most of the educated classes, often stress the virtues of the pre-Islamic period, when Iran had great and independent empires. Those who identify more with Islam stress the Islamic period and Islamic elements of culture. Such issues as the early history of language, culture, and religion have a contemporary importance, with those who stress Iranian nationalism seeing them very differently from those who stress Islam.

THE IRANIAN PAST AND ITS INTERPRETATION: PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN

First, we should briefly define Iran. People in the West long called Iran, "Persia" and think that when Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi shah, asked foreigners to use the name "Iran" he was requesting a change of name. In fact, "Iran" had been the most common indigenous name for the whole area since pre-Islamic times, while "Persia" was primarily a name for its southwest and "Persian" the name of Iran's main language. The name Persia was used by the ancient Greeks, and hence by later Europeans, for the ancient Achaemenian empire whose best-known rulers were Cyrus and Darius. The word "Iran" was used especially in the empires that ruled for a few centuries before the seventh-century Islamic conquest of Iran and it continued to be used later, even when there was not a single state in the territory of today's Iran. The Iranian national epic, the *Book of Kings*, with pre-Islamic roots, composed by the great poet Firdousi in the 10th century, contrasts Iran with its enemy, Turan.

Some scholars today oppose the writing of national histories, noting that national boundaries and nationalism are modern phenomena, and do not correspond with past boundaries or concepts. This is true, but history must be divided in some way, and national histories are one way to do this. Unfortunately, no good short history of Iran from pre-Islamic times to today exists, although there are important features that carried over and influenced Iran from ancient times. Also, pre-Islamic Iran has been a cultural battleground for twentieth century Iranians.

The most obvious influential and controversial feature is language: Persian is an Indo-European language, which means it is distantly related to English and French, and more closely to Sanscrit and North

Indian Languages. A language family, like other families, indicates a common ancestor, and it is thought that all the languages that branched off into Indo-European languages were descended from one ancestral language. Since many of these Indo-European groups conquered or infiltrated quite different peoples, imposing their basic language with some influences added from the preexisting local groups, this does not mean that people speaking related languages are racially close, as can be seen by comparing the appearance of Indo-European Scandinavians with Indo-European South Asians. The false equation of language and race was widespread in the west between around 1850-1950, and some Iranians, influenced by Western racist thinkers, took pride in being Indo-Europeans, or "Aryans" as they were also called until Hitler discredited the term by putting racial theory into horrible practice.

The Old Persian language came to Iran, perhaps around 1500 BC, with the migration of one branch of the Indo-European people-- called Indo-Iranian--into Iranian territory. The language evolved into Middle Persian, and later, after the Arab conquest, into New Persian. The Arab conquest introduced a large number of Arabic words into Persian and the Arabic script replaced old Near Eastern Cuneiform, but a language is considered to belong to the family that provides its basic structure and elementary vocabulary, and this is Persian. Iran was the largest Middle Eastern region to retain its former language after the original seventh-century Arab conquest. Iranians are hence not Arabs, as this term today means those whose basic language is Arabic. Many other languages are also spoken in Iran, mainly from two groups: the Turkic (e.g. Azerbaijani, Turcoman, Qashqai) and Iranian subfamily, related to Persian (e.g., Kurdish, Baluchi, Luri).

In addition to language, the pre-Islamic Iranian empires had a rather

sophisticated government structure and supporting theories of government. Much of this influenced the government and culture of Islamic polities, as the conquering Muslim Arabs had less experience with extensive empires and organized states. In the cultural field also, Iranians had a great number of scholars and thinkers, and many of the major intellectuals who wrote in Arabic in the Islamic period came from this Iranian cultural background--the philosopher Avicenna is probably the best-known in the West. Pre-Islamic Iran also had a poetic tradition, now mostly lost, and poetry in Persian flowered in the Islamic period--the names of the mystical poet Rumi and the poet and scientist Omar Khayyam are well-known in the west. Pre-Islamic artistic and decorative skills, perhaps best shown by the magnificent ruins of the Achaemenian palace at Persepolis, carried on into new arts and handicrafts in the Islamic period, with Persian miniatures and carpets best known in the West.

In religion, pre-Islamic Iran was predominantly Zoroastrian, following a religion which believed that the forces of good and evil--characterized by two divine figures--are conducting a long battle which the forces of good will ultimately win. Many of the key ideas of Zoroastrianism are generally thought to have influenced Judaism and, mainly through that route, Christianity and Islam. Among these are the figure of the devil, angels, the afterlife, and the last judgment. (Jews were in the Persian Empire from Achaemenian times on, and Christians from immediately pre-Islamic Sasanian times.) Pre-Islamic Iran also knew unorthodox and rebellious religious movements, which have characterized Iran from then till now. The most important was the Manichean movement beginning in the third century AD, where the prophet Mani created a syncretic religion that retained the good-evil dualism of Zoroastrianism but changed it by saying spirit was good and

matter evil. He had a group of elect who were celibate and pure. Some Manicheans influenced early Islam, and Manichean movements were important heresies in both the Muslim and Christian world. More radical was Mazdak in the fifth century AD, who called for common property in goods and perhaps communism of women.

Several features of pre-Islamic Iran have become important for the trend of Iranian nationalism dominant under the Pahlavi shahs. To weaken the power of the clergy and to provide support for a centralized national state, these shahs and many intellectuals glorified pre-Islamic Iran and even Zoroastrianism, which had previously been despised. Hence this ancient history is not distant for many Iranians, especially of the educated middle classes, but is rather a model for a strong, independent Iran, while they see the Arab-Islamic conquest as a negative event which brought cultural and political decline. (This view is greatly exaggerated, as Iran's greatest scholarly, philosophical, and literary work took place after the Islamic conquests.) The views of those who stress Islam are quite different.

THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

The declining Sasanian empire was rather easily defeated by the Muslim Arabs, and was by far the greatest state conquered by them (the Arabs took Byzantine territory but not the region of the capital, Constantinople). Conquest did not result in forced or rapid conversion, which took place over time in the early centuries, with the role of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians theoretically, but not always actually, protected. These religious groups, though smaller over time, have continued to exist down to the present. Though the first dynastic caliphate, the Umayyads, were largely Arab in culture and policies, the next great caliphate, the Abbasids 751-1258,

showed much Iranian influence in modes of rule modeled on Persian practices, and in culture. Autonomous Iranian states arose in the ninth-eleventh centuries, but after that it was mainly Turks, who came into the Iranian area in great numbers from the eleventh century on, who ruled. Even the Mongols who conquered and ruled in the thirteenth century had a strong Turkish element. Among all these rulers, though, Persian governmental practices, bureaucrats, and culture continued to be important.

An independent Iran covering roughly the same central area, but also more outlying territory than today's Iran, came to power with the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). Iran had known many rebellious movements with religious ideologies in the past, most of them related to the Shi'i branch of Islam, and the Safavids were in this tradition. The Shi'is were an originally political movement of followers of Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Mohammad, who felt he should be the first caliph. This became transformed into a religiopolitical movement of those who believed that legitimate succession to Mohammad could only be in Ali's line and that these leaders, called Imams, had divine power and knowledge. There were different branches of Shi'ism, and in early centuries the most revolutionary was the Sevener or Isma'ili branch. From it came the so-called Assassins of the 11th-13th centuries (a name from the Arabic Hashishiyun, or hashish users, and the origin of the word assassin). They set up independent enclaves centering in Iran and were known for a mode of battle that included killing prominent leaders. They were suppressed by the Mongols. Their descendant today as leader of most Ismailis is the politically quietist Aga Khan.

The other major branch of Shi'is, the Twelvers, believed that their Twelfth Imam had gone into hiding but would return as the messianic mahdi. In early centuries this belief promoted a politically quietist attitude

of waiting, but later some Twelvers became activist. The Safavids, who started as leaders of a Sunni Sufi (mystic) order in north Iran, became converted to a radical type of twelver Shi'ism--probably from radical Shi'i followers during their exile in Anatolia (Turkey)--and were the first to establish Shi'ism in Iran, where it had heretofore been a minority trend.

Although they were, like most rulers in Iran since the mid- eleventh century, Turks, the Safavids are often seen as founders of the modern Iranian state. This is because (1) they unified a large territory comparable to modern Iran and (2) they established a common religious base in Shi'ism. It is, however anachronistic to present this as a national state, and the Shi'i religious identity, largely forced on Iranians to distinguish them from the Sunni Ottoman and Uzbek enemy states, was far more important than any hints at a national identity. Shi'ism remains a primarily unifying force today.

Shi'ism later became largely intertwined with Iranian national identity down to today. Often it is impossible to say if a trend or identification is Iranian national or Shi'i, particularly since Iran is the only Shi'i state as well as the only Iranian one. This, however, has only been true since the Safavids, and attempts to view Muslim Iranians as always Shi'i or proto-Shi'i are ideological, not factual.

The history of Iran's Shi'i clergy is unique in the Muslim world and forms a background to clerical participation in the two major twentieth-century Iranian revolutions--the constitutional revolution (1905-1911) and the Islamic Revolution (1978-79). In Shi'ism, the imams are the source of infallible political and religious leadership. Once the twelfth Imam was said to be in hiding, there was no legitimate leadership, and gradually there developed the idea that leading clerics, through their knowledge, could best judge the infallible

will of the Imam. This led ultimately to a kind of clerical hierarchy where leading clerics, and sometimes a single top leader, were seen as the source of correct belief and action as well as the recipients of religious taxes to be disbursed. This independent power and wealth of the clergy began under the Safavids, was strengthened after the Safavids were conquered by Afghans in 1722, and became fully operative under the Qajar dynasty 1796-1925.

Relevant to these and later political and religious developments was Iran's economic and ecological history. As in much of the Middle East, Iran began as a region in which plants and animals were early domesticated--thousands of years ago--and economic surpluses were high enough to produce class specialization and a state. Over time, as in most of the Middle East, human use brought soil erosion and salination and increased aridity, which encouraged a great rise in pastoral nomadism along with a growth in tribal power and decline in central power. By the 19th century, Iran was economically less developed and politically weaker than the industrializing capitalist West.

The Qajars had to face the growth of Western power, represented especially by Great Britain and Russia, neither of whom wanted to border on the other. So they both supported continuation of a semi-independent dynasty which gave them many political and economic concessions. Ordinary Iranians suffered from European manufactured goods underselling their handicrafts and feared European control or conquest. In movements against both the Qajars and encroaching foreigners three groups stood out: merchants and craftspeople competing with Europeans; some of the Shi'i clergy, who saw European control as a menace to Islam; and a small group of intellectuals, who believed that Western-style modernization was the road to economic and political strength. In Iran the

unusual strength and independence of both the merchant and the clerical class encouraged mass movements of greater scope than elsewhere in the Middle East.

In 1891-92 a mass movement arose against a monopoly on tobacco growth and sale granted to a British subject sparked by merchants and joined by many clergy which led to cancellation of the concession. More important was the constitutional revolution of 1905-11, which again combined modernizers, merchants, and some clergy in a mass movement that forced the shah to grant a Western-style constitution with a parliament. Although internal discord and especially a Russian invasion ended this experiment in 1911, the constitution remained until a new regime replaced it in 1979.

The above events are matters of dispute between nationalists and Islamists. Islamists exaggerate the progressive role of the clergy, who were mostly fighting for their self-interest, while the nationalists try to prove the clergy never did anything in the national interest.

Nationalist and democratic feeling grew during the great destruction of World War I, when Iran was used as a battlefield by several powers, and a number of local movements right after the war expressed them. Reza Shah, who entered the government after a coup d'etat in 1921 and had himself named shah in 1925, inaugurated 50 years of super-rapid modernization and centralization in a country that hitherto had been decentralized, traditional, and overwhelmingly rural or nomadic-tribal. Culturally the Pahlavi shahs stressed the nationalism that admired pre-Islamic Iran, which was a way of bringing in Western-style modernization without alluding to its western origin. Reza Shah was friendly to the Germans and the allied British and Russians deposed him in 1941 when he refused to lend Iran to their wartime needs.

Mohammad Reza Shah's rule (1941-79) saw further modernization but increasing autocracy. Oil was an increasing issue in Iran since its discovery in 1908, and Iranians' desire to be free of foreign control took the form of a demand for nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which passed parliament just before the leading nationalist, Muhammad Mosaddeq, became prime minister in 1951. The Americans and British plotted against him and overthrew him in a CIA-organized coup in 1953, after which the Shah became increasingly autocratic.

Opposition to the Shah grew, including liberals, liberal Muslims, the left, and guerrilla groups, but the opposition that could reach the most people took the form of a modernized political Islam under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was exiled from Iran in 1964 after leading opposition demonstrations. A broad opposition movement to the shah's policies and subservience to the United States broke out throughout 1978; Khomeini returned to Iran in January 1979, and took over in February. In subsequent months the originally united and diverse revolutionary movement was taken over by pro-Khomeini clerics, and others were increasingly suppressed.

The 1979 constitution and its aftermath did not create a dictatorship. Power was divided between its strongest man, the Islamic leader--Khomeini till his 1989 death and then Khamene'i-- and governmental leaders and a parliament. Elections continued to occur. However there were great limits on freedom of speech and organization and, as in many revolutions, many were killed after the victory of what had been, before victory, a mostly non-violent movement.

Women's rights, at first suppressed after considerable reforms under the Pahlavis, have staged something of a comeback under women's pressure. And the

victory of a moderate president in 1997 is a hopeful sign. The economy, however, has declined greatly from its considerable earlier records, and there is still no freedom of political organization (something that had not existed for most of the Pahlavi period either). Nationalism has been largely revived, though officially combined with Islam, and even pre-Islamic glories are again stressed.

Iranian history evinces a number of recurrent trends, including: 1) The expression of important ideas, including political ideas, whether conservative or rebellious, in religious form; 2) a tendency toward one-person rule or charismatic leadership, and 3) rapid changes in dominant ideologies and movements, whether religious, nationalist or social. Iran, for example, has a long history of pre-modern rebellions, mostly Shi'i-tinged in the Islamic period, and also a modern history of the most mass-based revolutions in the Middle East. In addition, Iran had the largest Communist party in the Middle East, the most confrontational nationalist movement under Mosaddeq, and then the first Islamic Revolution. Behind these changes are some more constant factors, such as some continued sense of identity and of Iranian culture, as well as mores that go far back in time.

There have, however, been important changes in the modern era. Though this brief summary has dealt little with socioeconomic change, in the modern period Iran has changed from a decentralized society with much power in the hand of tribal and feudal leaders into one with considerable modern industry and with the economic base for national unity. Women have entered the modern labor market and educational institutions, even under the Islamic Republic, in unprecedented numbers. The rule of clerics is made possible by modern-educated technocrats who run the economy. This rule is far from being a return to the

past, and is very much a modern phenomenon, based largely on anti-imperialism and a search for identity.

Non-Shi'i religions include fewer than 10% of the population, making Iran more religiously homogeneous than most countries. Iran is, however, among the many countries with great linguistic diversity, with non-Persian languages spoken by half the population, including large regional groups like the Azerbaijanis, the Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and several smaller groups. Contested questions of identity are thus not limited to the all-Iranian national and Islamic alternatives, but now are found in minority groups and regions, some of which, especially after World War II and again after the 1979 revolution, have seen struggles for greater autonomy, with a very few demanding independence. Some of these minorities adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam, which is the majority branch outside Iran. The Sunni Turcomans, Baluchis, and mainly Sunni Kurds have seen autonomy struggles, while the Shi'i but Turkic-speaking Azerbaijanis have, until now, been better integrated for both religious and geographical reasons.

Iranian women, as their recently partly successful struggles to regain rights show, have developed organizational abilities based on often confident identities. Veiled women in the Muslim world are too often seen as faceless and wholly subordinate, while Iranian women today have more representation in education and the professions, including writing, journalism, and film directing, than ever before. They are not legally equal to men, but their struggles continue. Women historically participated in revolts, riots, and religious movements, and some have been organized to further women's rights since the early twentieth century.

Reza Shah's forced unveiling of women in 1936 had contradictory results, though his opening of schools and higher

education to women was more positive. Modernized women, however, became a symbol of subservience to the West and its ways under Mohammad Reza Shah, and many women, mostly veiled, participated in the 1979 revolution. One should not imagine that all women are chomping at the bit to end veiling and other "Islamic" ways, and divisions among women are as important as among other groups. There is a trend toward struggle and egalitarianism among today's Iranian women, however.

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