

Iran

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Culture Name

Iranian, Persian

Alternative Names

The term "Persian" is used as an adjective— especially pertaining to the arts—and to designate the principal language spoken in Iran. The term is often used to designate the larger cultural sphere of Iranian civilization. This includes populations living in Iraq, the Persian Gulf region, the Caucasus region, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. The formal name of the Iranian state is *Jomhuri-ye Islami-ye Iran*, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Orientation

Identification. The terms "Iran" as the designation for the civilization, and "Iranian" as the name for the inhabitants occupying the large plateau located between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf have been in continual use for more than twenty-five hundred years. They are related to the term "Aryan" and it is supposed that the plateau was occupied in prehistoric times by Indo-European peoples from Central Asia. Through many invasions and changes of empire, this essential designation has remained a strong identifying marker for all populations living in this region and the many neighboring territories that fell under its influence due to conquest and expansion.

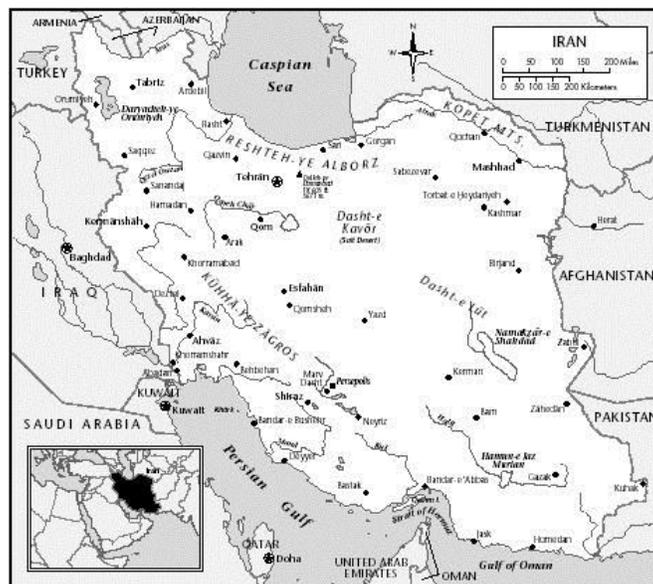
Ancient Greek geographers designated the territory as "Persia" after the territory of Fars where the ancient Achaemenian Empire had its seat. Today as a result of migration and conquest, people of Indo-European, Turkic, Arab, and Caucasian origin have some claim to Iranian cultural identity. Many of these peoples reside within the territory of modern Iran. Outside of Iran, those identifying with the larger civilization often prefer the appellation "Persian" to indicate their affinity with the culture rather than with the modern political state. This is also true of some members of modern Iranian émigré populations in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere who do not wish to be identified with the current Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979.

Location and Geography. Iran is located in southwestern Asia, largely on a high plateau situated between the Caspian Sea to the north and the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the south. Its area is 636,300 square miles (1,648,000 square kilometers). Its neighbors are, on the north, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkmenistan; on the east, Pakistan and Afghanistan; and on the west Turkey and Iraq. Iran's total boundary is 4,770 miles (7,680 kilometers). Approximately 30 percent of this boundary is seacoast. The capital is Tehran (Teheran).

Iran's central plateau is actually a tectonic plate. It forms a basin surrounded by several tall, heavily eroded mountain ranges, principally the Elburz Mountains in the north and the Zagros range in the west and south. The geology is highly unstable, creating frequent earthquakes. Several important volcanoes, including Mount Damāvand, the nation's highest peak at approximately 19,000 feet, (5,800 meters) also ring the country.

The arid interior plateau contains two remarkable deserts: the Dasht-e-Kavir (Kavir Desert) and the Dasht-e-Lut (Lūt Desert). These two deserts dominate the eastern part of the country, and form part of an arid landscape extending into Central Asia and Pakistan.

Iran's climate is one of extremes, ranging from subtropical to subpolar, due to the extreme variations in altitude and rainfall throughout the nation. Temperatures range from as high as 130 degrees Fahrenheit (55 degrees Celsius) in the southwest and along the Persian Gulf coast to -40 degrees Fahrenheit (-40 degrees Celsius). Rainfall varies from less than two inches (five centimeters) annually in Baluchistan, near the Pakistani border, to



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more than eighty inches (two hundred centimeters) in the subtropical Caspian region where temperatures rarely fall below freezing.

Demography. Iran's population has not been accurately measured since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Recent population estimates range from sixty-one to sixty-five million. The population is balanced (51 percent male, 49 percent female), extremely young, and urban. More than three-quarters of Iran's habitants are under thirty years of age, and an equal percentage live in urban areas. This marks a radical shift from the mid-twentieth century when only 25 percent lived in cities.

Iran is a multiethnic, multicultural society as a result of millennia of migration and conquest. It is perhaps easiest to speak of the various ethnic groups in the country in terms of their first language. Approximately half of the population speaks Persian and affiliated dialects as their primary language. The rest of the population speaks languages drawn from Indo-European, Ural-Altai (Turkic), or Semitic language families.

The principal non-Persian Indo-European speakers include Kurds, Lurs, Baluchis, and Armenians, making up approximately 15 percent of the population. Turkic speakers constitute approximately 20 to 25 percent of the population. The largest group of Turkic speakers lives in the northwest provinces of East and West Azerbaijan. Other Turkic groups include the Qashqa'i tribe in the south and southwest part of the central plateau, and the Turkmen in the northeast. Semitic speakers, constituting approximately 10 percent of the population, include a large Arabic-speaking population in the extreme southwest province of Khuzestan, and along the Persian Gulf Coast, and a small community of Assyrians in the northwest, who speak Syriac. The remains of a miniscule community of Dravidian speakers lives in the extreme eastern province of Sistan along the border with Afghanistan.

It is important to note that, with some minor exceptions, all ethnic groups living in Iran, whatever their background or primary language, identify strongly with the major features of Iranian culture and civilization. This also applies to many non-Iranians living in Afghanistan, Central Asia, northern India, and parts of Iraq and the Persian Gulf region.

Linguistic Affiliation. In English, "Persian" is the name for the primary language spoken in Iran. It is incorrect, but increasingly common in English-speaking countries to use the native term, "Farsi," to identify the language. This is somewhat akin to using "Deutsch" to describe the principal language of Germany.

Modern Persian, a part of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages, is a language of great antiquity. It is also a language of extraordinary grace and flexibility.

Over many centuries, it absorbed Arabic vocabulary and many Turkish elements, swelling its vocabulary to well over 100,000 commonly used words. At the same time, over the many centuries when Arabic was dominant, Persian lost much of its grammatical complexity. The resulting language is mellifluous, easy to learn, and ideally suited for the unsurpassed poetry and literature Iranians have produced over the ages. The language is remarkably stable; Iranians can read twelfth century literature with relative ease.

The majority of Iranian residents whose first language is not Persian are bilingual in Persian and their primary language. Persons whose first language is Persian are usually monolingual.

Symbolism. Iranian culture is rich in cultural symbolism, much of which derives from prehistoric times. Iran is the only nation in the Middle East that uses the solar calendar. It is also the only nation on earth marking the advent of the New Year at the spring equinox.

The Islamic and the pre-Islamic world have both provided national symbols for Iran, and these have come in conflict in recent years. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the shah who was deposed in 1979, tried to make the twenty-five-hundred-year-old monarchy itself a central symbol of Iranian life. He designed a series of lavish public celebrations to cement this image in the public imagination. The ancient emblem for the nation was a lion holding a scimitar against a rising sun. This emblem was a symbol not only of Iran, but also of the ancient monarchy, and was prominently displayed on the national tricolor flag of red, white, and green. The Persian lion is now extinct, and since the 1979 Revolution, so is this emblem. It has been replaced by a nonfigurative symbol that can be construed as a calligraphic representation of the basic Islamic creed, "There is no god but God." The tricolor background has been maintained.

Much symbolism in daily life derives not just from Islam, but from the "Twelver" branch of Shi'a Islam that has been the official state religion since the seventeenth century. It is essential to note the central symbolic importance of Imam Hassain, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, who was martyred in Karbala in present-day Iraq during the Islamic month of Muharram in the seventh century. His martyrdom is a "master symbol" in Iranian life, serving as an inexhaustible source of imagery and rhetoric.

History and Ethnic Relations

Emergence of the Nation. The Iranian nation is one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world. Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic populations occupied caves in

the Zagros and Elburz mountains. The earliest civilizations in the region descended from the Zagros foothills, where they developed agriculture and animal husbandry, and established the first urban cultures in the Tigris-Euphrates basin in present day Iraq. The earliest urban peoples in what is today Iranian territory were the Elamites in the extreme southwest region of Khuzestan. The arrival of the Aryan peoples—Medes and Persians— on the Iranian plateau in the first millennium B.C.E. marked the beginning of the Iranian civilization, rising to the heights of the great [Achaemenid Empire](#) consolidated by Cyrus the Great in 550B.C.E. Under the rulers Darius the Great and Xerxes, the Achaemenid rulers extended their empire from northern India to Egypt.

Down to the present, one pattern has repeated again and again in Iranian civilization: the conquerors of Iranian territory are eventually themselves



Donkeys carry grass loads past typical mud-brick buildings in a small Iranian village.

conquered by Iranian culture. In a word, they become Persianized.

The first of these conquerors was Alexander the Great, who swept through the region and conquered the Achaemenid Empire in 330B.C.E. Alexander died shortly thereafter leaving his generals and their descendants to establish their own subempires. The process of subdivision and conquest culminated in the establishment of the entirely Persian Sassanid Empire at the beginning of the third century C.E. The Sassanians consolidated all territories east to China and India, and engaged successfully with the Byzantine Empire.

The second great conquerors were the Arab Muslims, arising from Saudi Arabia in 640C.E. They gradually melded with the Iranian peoples, and in 750, a revolution

emanating from Iranian territory assured the Persianization of the Islamic world through the establishment of the great Abbasid Empire at Baghdad. The next conquerors were successive waves of Turkish peoples starting in the eleventh century. They established courts in the northeastern region of Khorassan, founding several great cities. They became patrons of Persian literature, art, and architecture.

Successive Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century resulted in a period of relative instability culminating in a strong reaction in the early sixteenth century on the part of a resurgent religious movement—the Safavids. The Safavid rulers started as a religious movement of adherents of Twelver Shi'ism. They established this form of Shi'ism as the Iranian state religion. Their empire, which ranged from the Caucasus to northern India, raised Iranian civilization to its greatest height. The Safavid capital, Isfahan, was by all accounts one of the most civilized places on earth, far in advance of most of Europe.

Subsequent conquests by the Afghans and the Qājār Turks had the same result. The conquerors came and became Persianized. During the Qājār period from 1899 to 1925, Iran came into contact with European civilization in a serious way for the first time. The industrial revolution in the West seriously damaged Iran's economy, and the lack of a modern army with the latest in weaponry and military transport resulted in serious losses of territory and influence to Great Britain and Russia. Iranian rulers responded by selling "concessions" for agricultural and economic institutions to their European rivals to raise the funds needed for modernization. Much of the money went directly into the pockets of the Qājār rulers, cementing a public image of collaboration between the throne and foreign interests that characterized much of twentieth century Iranian political life. A series of public protests against the throne took place at regular intervals from the 1890s to the 1970s. These protests regularly involved religious leaders, and continued throughout the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). These protests culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979, hereafter referred to as "the Revolution."

National Identity. The establishment of the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini marked a return to religious domination of Iranian culture. Khomeini's symbols were all appropriately appealing to Iranian sensibilities as he called on the people to become martyrs to Islam like Hasan, and restore the religious rule of Hasan's father, Ali, the last leader of both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Now, more than twenty years after the Revolution and following Khomeini's death, Iran is once again undergoing change. Its youthful population is demanding liberalization of the strict religious rule of its leaders, and a return to the historic balance of religion and secularism that has characterized the nation for most of its history.

Ethnic Relations. Iran has been somewhat blessed by an absence of specific ethnic conflict. This is noteworthy, given the large number of ethnic groups living within its borders, both today and in the past. It is safe to conclude that the general Iranian population neither persecutes ethnic minorities, nor openly discriminates against them.

Some groups living within Iranian borders do assert autonomy occasionally, however. Chief among these are the Kurds, living on Iran's western border. Fiercely independent, they have pressed the Iranian central government to grant economic concessions and autonomous decision-making powers. However, outside of the urban areas in their region, the Kurds already have formidable control over their regions. Iranian central government officials tread very lightly in these areas. The Kurds in Iran, along with their brethren in Iraq and Turkey, have long desired an independent state. The immediate prospects for this are dim.

The nomadic tribal groups in the southern and western regions of the Iranian central plateau have likewise caused problems for the Iranian central government. Because they are in movement with their sheep and goats for more than half of the year, they have historically been difficult to control. They are also generally self-sufficient, and a small minority are even quite well-off. Attempts to settle these tribes in the past have met with violent action. At present they entertain an uneasy peace with Iranian central authorities.

The Arab population of the southwestern trans-Zagros Gulf province of Khuzestan has entertained political aspirations of breaking away from Iran. These aspirations have been encouraged by Iraq and other Arab states. In times of conflict between Iran and Iraq, Iraqi leaders have supported this separatist movement as a way of antagonizing Iranian officials.

The severest social persecution in Iran has been directed at religious minorities. Periods of relative tolerance have alternated with periods of discrimination for centuries. Under the current Islamic republic, these minorities have had a difficult time. Although theoretically protected as "People of the Book" according to Islamic law, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians have faced accusations of spying for Western nations or for Israel. Islamic officials also take a dim view of their tolerance of alcohol consumption, and the relative freedom accorded to women. The one group that has been universally persecuted since its nineteenth century founding is the Baha'i community, because its religion is viewed as heretical by Shi'a Muslims.

Urbanism, Architecture, and the Use of Space

Until recently Iran was primarily a rural culture. Even today with rampant urbanization, Iranians value nature and make every attempt to spend time in the open air. Because Iran is largely a desert, however, the ideal open space is a culturally constructed space—a garden. At the same time Iranians will try to bring the outdoors inside whenever possible. The wonderfully intricate carpets that every family strives to own are miniature gardens replete with flower and animal designs. Fresh fruit and flowers are a part of every entertainment, and nature and gardens are central themes in literature and poetry.

This underscores a fascinating central motif in Iranian architecture—the juxtaposition of "inside" and "outside." These two concepts are more than architectural themes. They are deeply central to Iranian life, pervading spiritual life and social conduct. The inside, *orandaruni*, is the most private, intimate area of any architectural space. It is the place where family members are most relaxed and able to behave in the most unguarded manner. The outside, *orbiruni*, is by contrast a public space where social niceties must be observed. Every family creates both kinds of spaces, even if living in a single room. Until the nineteenth century, Iranians did not use chairs. They normally sat cross-legged on the floor, preferably on a carpet with bolsters or pillows. In the twentieth century, furniture became the hallmark of the *biruni*, and now every family of any standing has a room stuffed with uncomfortable furniture for receiving important visitors. When the guests leave, family members give a sigh of relief and go to the *andaruni* where they can relax on the plush carpet.

An Iranian home is one where any room, with the exception of those used for cooking and bodily functions, can be used for any social purpose— eating, sleeping, entertainment, business, or whatever else one can conceive. One spreads a dinner cloth, and it is a dining room. After dinner, the cloth is removed, cotton mattresses are spread, and the room becomes a bedchamber. Contrast this to an American home where each room has specific functions, or is designated the specific territory of a given family member. As a result, Iranian families can live and entertain many guests in much less space than in the West. This is a social necessity, since the members of one's extended family, and even their friends and acquaintances, have an ironclad claim on virtually unlimited hospitality. One must be prepared to entertain many overnight guests at a moment's notice.

In addition to intimacy, the notion of the *andaruni* pertains to modesty for women. This is a consideration in all public arrangement of space, especially since the advent of the Islamic Republic. Some zealots will not allow men to sit on a spot that is still warm from

a woman's presence. By contrast, public space occupied by persons of the same sex can be very close and intimate with no hint of eroticism or immodesty.

The historical Iranian city is constructed around the commercial center—the bazaar. Architect Nader Ardalan has likened the city to the human body. The bazaar is the spine of the city. Emanating from it are all the institutions needed by the urban population. At the top of the bazaar sits the "head" of this body—the great congregational mosque where all citizens gather on Friday for common prayers and perhaps a sermon. The bazaar is divided into sections inhabited by the various trade guilds. Thus all the carpenters are in one section, the goldsmiths in another, and the shoemakers in yet another.

The bazaar is punctuated with the "outside brought inside" in the form of pools and running water, and even perhaps a religious school with a small garden. The urban space surrounding the bazaar is likewise punctuated by the "inside brought outside" in the form of enclosed public gardens for private discourse in public. Houses in residential neighborhoods are built with abutting walls, each home having its bit of the outside in the form of an open courtyard with a pool, and a tree and a few flowers or a kitchen garden.

In the twentieth century, however, the needs of modern motor transportation and increased urban population density have destroyed much of the texture of the traditional city. Wide avenues have been cut through the traditional quarters in almost every city, disrupting the integrity of the old neighborhoods. Faceless apartment buildings have sprung up depriving residents of their gardens, save for a pot or two of flowers on a small balcony.

Public architecture has always been the essence of *birunīn* in Iran. Grandiose in style, it almost demands formal social behavior. This has been true since Achaemenid times, as a visit to the ruins of their capital, Persepolis, will attest. The grandiose public mosques, shrines, and squares of Isfahan, Mashhad, Shīrāz, and Qom are overwhelming in their beauty and architectural excellence. Unfortunately, the great public buildings of Tehran built in the twentieth century have the bad fortune to have been built to emulate the most stark Western architectural styles.

Food and Economy

Food in Daily Life. As one might expect from Iran's geographic situation, its food strikes a medium between Greek and Indian preparations. It is more varied than Greek food, and less spicy and subtler than Indian food with a greater use of fresh ingredients.

Iranians have a healthy diet centered on fresh fruits, greens and vegetables. Meat (usually lamb, goat, or chicken) is used as a condiment rather than as the centerpiece of a meal. Rice and fresh unleavened or semi leavened whole-grain bread are staple starches. The primary beverage is black tea. The principal dietary taboo is the Islamic prohibition against pork.

Breakfast is a light meal consisting of fresh unleavened bread, tea, and perhaps butter, white (feta-style) cheese, and jam. Eggs may also be eaten fried or boiled. Meat is not common at breakfast.

The main meal of the day is eaten at around one o'clock in the afternoon. In a middle-class household it usually starts with a plate of fresh greens— scallions, radishes, fresh basil, mint, coriander, and others in season. This is served with unleavened bread and white cheese. The main dish is steamed aromatic rice (*chelow*) served with one or more stews made of meat and a fresh vegetable or fruit. This stew, called *khoresh* resembles a mild curry. It centers on a central ingredient such as eggplant, okra, spinach, quince, celery, or a myriad of other possibilities. One particularly renowned *khoresh*, *fesenjun*, consists of lamb, chicken, duck, or pheasant cooked in a sauce of onions, ground walnuts, and pomegranate molasses. In addition to its preparation as *chelow*, rice may also be prepared as a pilaf (*polow*) by mixing in fresh herbs, vegetables, fruit, or meat after it is boiled, but before it is steamed.

The Iranian national dish, called *chelow kabab*, consists of filet of lamb marinated in lemon juice or yogurt, onions, and saffron, pounded with a knife on a flat skewer until fork tender and grilled over a hot fire. This is served with grilled onions and tomatoes on a bed of *chelow* to which has been added a lump of butter and a raw egg yolk. The butter and egg are mixed with the hot rice (which cooks the egg), and ground sumac berries are sprinkled on top. A common drink with a meal is *dough*, a yogurt and salted water preparation that is similar to Turkish ayran, Lebanese lebni, and Indian lassi.



An Iranian woman sits on the ground while she makes knitted crafts in the Maseleh village located 1,050 meters above sea level in the Alborz Mountains.

Sweets are more likely to be consumed with tea in the afternoon than as dessert. Every region of the country has special confections prized as travel souvenirs, and served casually to guests. Among the most famous are *gaz*, a natural nougat made with rose water, and *sohan*, a saffron, butter, and pistachio praline. After a meal Iranians prefer fresh fruit and tea. In fact, fruit is served before the meal, after the meal—indeed, at any time.

The evening meal is likely to be a light meal consisting of leftover food from the noon meal, or a little bread, cheese, fruit, and tea. Urban dwellers may eat a light meal at a café or restaurant in the evening.

Outside of large cities, restaurants are not very common in Iran. On the other hand, teahouses are ubiquitous, and widely frequented at all times of day. One can always get some kind of meal there.

Alcoholic beverages are officially forbidden in Iran today under the Islamic republic, but their consumption is still widely practiced. Armenian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities still produce wine, and local moonshine is found everywhere in rural areas. The principal alcoholic beverage is "vodka" distilled from grain, grapes, or more commonly, raisins. It is consumed almost exclusively by men in the evening or at celebrations such as weddings.

Food Customs at Ceremonial Occasions. Ritual foods fall into two categories—foods that are eaten in celebration, and foods that are prepared and consumed as a charitable religious act.

A few foods are traditional for the New Year's celebration. Fish is widely consumed as the first meal of the New Year, along with *apolow* made with greens. One food appears on the ritual New Year's table, but is rarely eaten. This is a kind of sweet pudding made of ground sprouted wheat called *samanou*.

During the Islamic month of fasting, Ramadan, no food or drink is consumed from sunrise to sunset. Families rise before dawn to prepare heavy breakfasts that look like the noon meal. The process is repeated at sundown. Special crispy fried sweets made from a yogurt batter and soaked in syrup are frequently served. Two forms are popular: *zulbia*, which looks a bit like a multi stranded pretzel, and *bamieh*, which looks a bit like the okra pods it is named after.

Food is frequently prepared for distribution to the community as a charitable religious act. When a sheep is slaughtered for a special occasion it is common to give meat to all of one's neighbors. To give thanks for fulfillment of a desire, a community meal is

frequently prepared. Likewise, during the mourning ceremonies for Hossein during the months of Muharram and Safar, communal meals are paid for by charitable individuals. The most common food served on these occasions is *apolow* made with yellow peas and meat.

Basic Economy. Historically Iran has been an agricultural nation with fairly rich resources both for vegetable crops and animal husbandry. In the twentieth century, Iran's economy changed in a radical fashion due to the discovery of oil. By the time of the Revolution the nation received more than 80 percent of its income from oil and oil-related industry. While in 1955 more than 75 percent of the population lived in rural areas, distribution has reversed. Now more than 75 percent of Iranians live in urban areas, deriving their incomes either from manufacturing or from the service sector (currently the largest sector of the economy).

The goals of the Islamic Republic include a drive for self-sufficiency in food and manufacture. At present, however, only about 10 percent of the nation's agricultural land is under cultivation, and subsistence farming is all but dead. Iran remains a net importer of food and manufactured goods, a condition that will not change soon. Inflation is a continual problem. Were it not for oil income, the nation would be in difficult straits.

Land Tenure and Property. Absentee landlords in Iran held traditional agricultural land for many hundreds of years. They employed a sharecropping arrangement with their tenant farmers based on a principle of five shares: land, water, seed, animal labor, and human labor. The farmer rarely supplied more than human and animal labor, and thus received two-fifths of the produce. Additionally landlords hired some agricultural laborers to work land for them for direct wages.

Sharecropping farmers received the land they farmed in the land reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but the wage farmers received nothing, and largely abandoned agricultural pursuits.

Nomadic tribes claim grazing rights along their route of migration, with the rights parceled out by family affiliation. Government officials have contested and opposed these rights at various times on environmental grounds (overgrazing), but they have not been able to marshal effective enforcement. Tribal members also maintain agricultural land both at their summer and winter pasture headquarters.



A carpet maker works on a loom at his shop in Na'in.

Religious bequest (*waqf*) land plays a large role in Iranian life. Large landowners on their death have willed whole villages as well as other kinds of property to the religious bequest trust. Nearly the entire city of Mashhad is waqf land. Individuals in that city can buy houses and office buildings, but not the land on which they stand. Part of the strategic plan of the Pahlavi rulers was to break the economic power of the clergy who controlled this vast property by nationalizing it, and placing its administration under a government ministry. This was one of the government actions most vehemently opposed by the clergy before the Revolution. Nevertheless, the waqf is still administered by a government ministry.

Major Industries. Iran today has a steel plant, automobile and bus assembly plants, a good infrastructure of roads, a decent telecommunication system, and good broadcast facilities for radio and television. These have all been extended under the Islamic Republic, as has rural electrification. Mining and exploitation of Iran's extensive mineral wealth other than oil is largely moribund. Moves to privatize industry have been slow; 80 percent of all economic activity is under direct government control.

Trade. Aside from oil products, the nation's exports include carpets, caviar, cotton, fruits, textiles, minerals, motor vehicles, and nuts. A small amount of fresh produce and meat is exported to the states of the Persian Gulf.

Social Stratification

Classes and Castes. Iranian society presents a puzzle for most standard social science analysis of social structure. On the one hand there is an out-ward appearance

of extensive social stratification. When one peers beneath the surface, however, this impression breaks down almost immediately.

In Iran one can never judge a book by its cover. A traditional gentleman in ragged clothes, unshaven, and without any outward trapping of luxury may in fact be very rich, and as powerful as the mightiest government official; or he may be a revered spiritual leader. On the other hand a well-dressed gentleman in an Italian suit driving a fine European car may be mired in debt and openly derided behind his back.

Social mobility is also eminently possible in Iran. Clever youths from poor backgrounds may educate themselves, attach themselves to persons of power and authority, and rise quickly in status and wealth. Family connections help here, and hypergamy (marriage into a higher class) for both men and women is very important.

High status is precarious in Iran. There is a symbiotic relationship between superior and inferior. Duty is incumbent on the inferior, but the noblesse oblige incumbent on the superior as a condition of maintaining status is often greater, as the last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, discovered in the Revolution.

Nevertheless there are genuinely revered figures in public life. Public respect is largely accorded by diffuse and generalized acclimation, this being a form of status recognition that Iranians trust. The public has a tendency to dismiss awards, promotions, and public accolades as the result of political or social intriguing. The clerical hierarchy in Shi'a Islam is a good model for genuine advancement in social hierarchy because clerics advance through the informal acknowledgment of their peers.

Political Life

Government. Iran has made the transition in the last twenty years from a nominal constitutional monarchy to a democratic theocracy. As the United States has checks and balances in its governmental system, so does Iran. There is a strong president elected for a four-year term, and a unicameral legislature (*majles*) of 270 members, elected directly by the people, with some slots reserved for recognized minorities. The position of speaker is politically important, since there is no prime minister. Suffrage is universal, and the voting age is sixteen. The president selects a Council of Ministers, an Expediency Council, and serves as the head of the Council of National Security.

Over and above these elected bodies there is a supreme jurispudent selected by an independent Assembly of Experts—a council of religious judges. The office of chief jurispudent (*faqih*) was created for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini at the time of the Revolution. It was designed to implement a controversial philosophy unique to

Khomeini's teachings—a "guardianship" to be implemented until the day of return of the twelfth Shi'a Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who is in occultation (being hidden from view). Alongside the chief jurist is a twelve-member Council of Guardians, six selected by the chief jurist, and six by the Supreme Judicial Council ratified by the majles. The Council of Guardians rules on the Islamic suitability of both elected officials and the laws they pass. They can disqualify candidates for election both before and after they are elected. Another council mediates between the Council of Guardians and the legislature.

The judiciary consists of a Supreme Judge and a Supreme Judicial Council. All members must be Shi'a Muslim jurists. Islamic Shari'a law is the foundation for the court's decisions. Freedom of the press and assembly are constitutionally guaranteed so long as such activities do not contradict Islamic law.

The units of governmental division are the province (*ostan*), "county" (*sharestan*), and township (*dehestan*). Each governmental unit has a head appointed by the Ministry of the Interior.

Military Activity. Although there is a standing army, navy, and air force, the Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran-e Engelab*), organized shortly after the Revolution, dominate military activities, often coming into conflict with the standard military forces. The Revolutionary Guards either accompany or lead all military activities, both internal and international. A national police force oversees urban areas, and a gendarmerie attends to rural peacekeeping.

Social Welfare and Change Programs

The Islamic Republic of Iran is replete with charitable organizations. It is incumbent upon all Muslims to devote a proportion of their excess income to the support of religious and charitable works. This contribution is voluntary, but the government collects this tithe and uses the income to support hospitals, orphanages, and religious schools. The government is also committed to rural development projects. A movement called the "sacred development struggle" (*jihad-e sazandegi*) was launched early in the Islamic Republic and was successful in bringing important development projects—electrification, drinking water and roads—to remote rural areas. There are many small private charitable organizations organized to help the poor, fatherless families, children, and other unfortunate citizens. The Iranian Red Crescent Society (the local version of the Red Cross) is active and important in the instance of national disaster. Iran is a net

exporter of charity to neighboring countries. It has assisted with disaster relief in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region.

Nongovernmental Organizations and Other Associations

There are very few international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating independent development or health programs in Iran at present, except in conjunction with Iranian governmental organizations. The current regime views independent NGOs with deep suspicion, and in its aim for self-sufficiency views the work of many international charities as unnecessary. The United Nations (UN) is the one important exception. Iran has supported the UN since its inception, and a number of UN programs in health, development, population, and the preservation of cultural antiquities are active. The nation's Mostazafin ("downtrodden people") Foundation and the Imam Khomeini Foundation have operated in the international sphere.

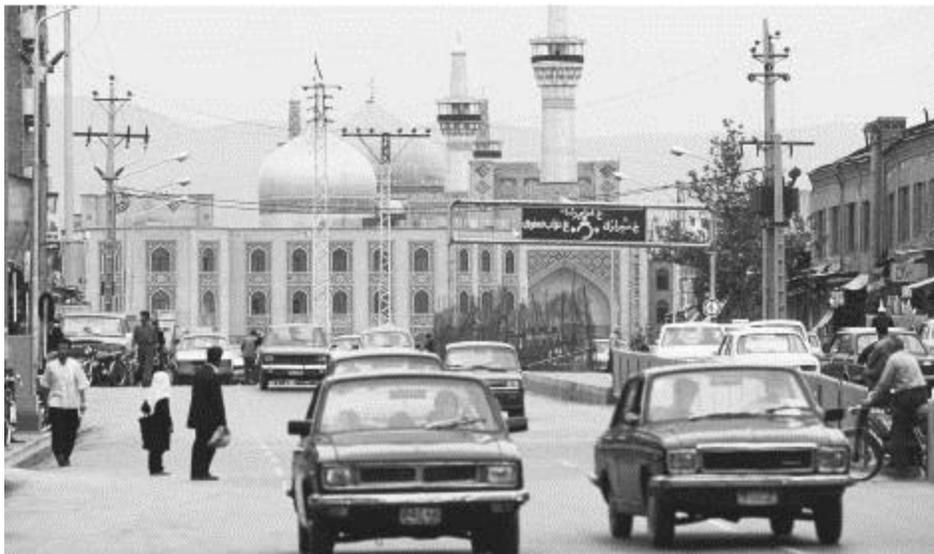
Gender Roles and Statuses

The Relative Status of Women and Men. The question of gender roles is one of the most complex issues in contemporary Iranian society. Women have always had a strong role in Iranian life, but rarely a public role. Their prominent participation in political movements has been especially noteworthy. Brave and often ruthlessly pragmatic, women are more than willing to take to the streets for a good public cause. Moreover, although the world focuses increasingly on the question of female dress as an indicator of progress for women in Iran (and indeed, in the Islamic world altogether), this is a superficial view. In the years since the Revolution, women have made astonishing progress in nearly every area of life.

Both the Pahlavi regime and the leaders of the Islamic Republic have gone out of their way to emphasize their willingness to have women operate as full participants in government and public affairs. Women have served in the legislature and as government ministers since the 1950s. The average marriage age for women has increased to twenty-one years. Iran's birthrate has fallen steadily since before the Revolution, now standing at an estimated 2.45 percent. Education for women is obligatory and universal, and education for girls has increased steadily. The literacy rate for women is close to that of men, and for women under 25 it is over 90 percent, even in rural areas.

Female employment is the one area where women have suffered a decline since the Revolution. Even under the current Islamic regime, virtually all professions are theoretically open to women—with an important caveat. The difficulty for the leaders of the Islamic republic in allowing women complete equality in employment and public activity revolves around religious questions of female modesty that run head-to-head with the exigencies of public life. Islam requires that both women and men adopt modest dress that does not inflame carnal desire. For men this means eschewing tight pants, shorts, short-sleeved shirts, and open collars. Iranians view women's hair as erotic, and so covering both the hair and the female form are the basic requirements of modesty. For many centuries women in Iran have done this by wearing the chador, a semicircular piece of dark cloth that is wrapped expertly around the body and head, and gathered at the chin. This garment is both wonderfully convenient, since it affords a degree of privacy, and lets one wear virtually anything underneath; and restricting, since it must be held shut with one hand. Makeup of any kind is not allowed. In private, women dress as they please, and often exhibit fashionable, even daring, clothing for their female friends and spouses.

Any public activity that would require women to depart from this modest dress in mixed company is expressly forbidden. Professions requiring physical exertion outdoors are excluded, as are most public entertainment roles. Interestingly, film and television are open to women provided they observe modest dress standards. This has created an odd separate-but-equal philosophy in Iranian life. Some



Vehicles travel on a street near the Eman Reza Shrine in Mashhad.

activities, such as sports events, have been set up for exclusively female participants and female spectators.

Westernized Iranian women have long viewed obligatory modest dress in whatever forms as oppressive, and have worked to have standards relaxed. These standards certainly have been oppressive when forced on the female population in an obsessive manner. Revolutionary Guards have mutilated some women for showing too much hair or for wearing lipstick. But the majority of women in Iran have always adopted modest dress voluntarily, and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future no matter what political decisions are made on this matter.

The emotional roles of Iranian men and women are different from those in the United States and many other Western countries. In particular, it is considered manly for men to be emotionally sensitive, artistically engaged, and aesthetically acute. Women, by contrast, can be emotionally distant and detached without seeming unfeminine. Open weeping is not shameful for either sex. Both sexes can be excessively tender and doting toward their same-sex friends with no intention of eroticism. Kissing and hand-holding between members of the same sex is common.

By contrast, physical contact between members of the opposite sex is assiduously avoided except between relatives. Western men offering to shake a traditional Iranian woman's hand may see her struggling between a desire to be polite, and a desire not to breach standards of decency. The solution for many a woman is to cover her hand with part of her chador and shake hands that way. Under no circumstances should a proper man or woman willingly find themselves alone in a closed room with a member of the opposite sex (except for his or her spouse).

Marriage, Family, and Kinship

Marriage. In Iran women control marriages for their children, and much intrigue in domestic life revolves around marital matters. A mother is typically on the lookout for good marriage prospects at all times. Even if a mother is diffident about marriage brokering, she is obliged to "clear the path" for a marriage proposal. She does this by letting her counterpart in the other family know that a proposal is forthcoming, or would be welcome. She then must confer with her husband, who makes the formal proposal in a social meeting between the two families. This kind of background work is essential, because once the children are married, the two families virtually merge, and have extensive rights and obligations vis-à-vis each other that are close to a sacred duty. It is therefore extremely important that the families be certain that they are compatible before the marriage takes place.

Marriage within the family is a common strategy, and a young man of marriageable age has an absolute right of first refusal for his father's brother's daughter—his patrilateral parallel cousin. The advantages for the families in this kind of marriage are great. They already know each other and are tied into the same social networks. Moreover, such a marriage serves to consolidate wealth from the grandparents' generation for the family. Matrilateral cross-cousin marriages are also common, and exceed parallel-cousin marriages in urban areas, due perhaps to the wife's stronger influence in family affairs in cities.

Although inbreeding would seem to be a potential problem, the historical preference for marriage within the family continues, waning somewhat in urban settings where other considerations such as profession and education play a role in the choice of a spouse. In 1968, 25 percent of urban marriages, 31 percent of rural marriages, and 51 percent of tribal marriages were reported as endogamous. These percentages appear to have increased somewhat following the Revolution.

In Iran today a love match with someone outside of the family is clearly not at all impossible, but even in such cases, except in the most westernized families, the family visitation and negotiation must be observed. Traditional marriages involve a formal contract drawn up by a cleric. In the contract a series of payments are specified. The bride brings a dowry to the marriage usually consisting of household goods and her own clothing. A specified amount is written into the contract as payment for the woman in the event of divorce. The wife after marriage belongs to her husband's household and may have difficulty visiting her relatives if her husband does not approve. Nevertheless, she retains her own name, and may hold property in her own right, separate from her husband.

The wedding celebration is held after the signing of the contract. It is really a prelude to the consummation of the marriage, which takes place typically at the end of the evening, or, in rural areas, at the end of several days' celebration. In many areas of Iran it is still important that the bride be virginal, and the bedsheets are carefully inspected to ensure this. A wise mother gives her daughter a vial of chicken blood "just in case." The new couple may live with their relatives for a time until they can set up their own household. This is more common in rural than in urban areas.

Iran is an Islamic nation, and polygyny is allowed. It is not widely practiced, however, because Iranian officials in this century have followed the Islamic prescription that a man taking two wives must treat them with absolute equality. Women in polygynous marriages hold their husbands to this and will seek legal relief if they feel they are

disadvantaged. Statistics are difficult to ascertain, but one recent study claims that only 1 percent of all marriages are polygynous.

Divorce is less common in Iran than in the West. Families prefer to stay together even under difficult circumstances, since it is extremely difficult to disentangle the close network of interrelationships between the two extended families of the marriage pair. One recent study claims that the divorce rate is 10 percent in Iran. For Iranians moving to the United States the rate is 66 percent, suggesting that cultural forces tend to keep couples from separating.

Children of a marriage belong to the father. After a divorce, men assume custody of boys over three years and girls over seven. Women have been known to renounce their divorce payment in exchange for custody of their children. There is no impediment to remarriage with another partner for either men or women.

Domestic Unit. In traditional Iranian rural society the "dinner cloth" often defines the minimal family. Many branches of an extended family may live in rooms in the same compound. However, they may not all eat together on a daily basis. Sons and their wives and children are often working for their parents in anticipation of a birthright in the form of land or animals. When they receive this, they will leave and form their own separate household. In the meantime they live in their parents' compound, but have separate eating and sleeping arrangements. Even after they leave their parents' home, members of extended families have widespread rights to hospitality in the homes of even their most distant relations. Indeed, family members generally carry out most of their socializing with each other.

Inheritance. Inheritance generally follows rules prescribed by Islamic law. Male children inherit full shares of their father's estate, wives and daughters half-shares. An individual may make a religious bequest of specific goods or property that are then administered by the ministry of waqfs.

Kin Groups. The patriarch is the oldest male of the family. He demands respect from other family members and often has a strong role in the future of young relatives. In particular it is common for members of an extended family to spread themselves out in terms of professions and influence. Some will go into government, others into the military, perhaps others join the clergy, and some may even become anti-government oppositionists. Families will attempt to marry their children into powerful families as much for their own sake as for the son or daughter. The general aim for the family is to extend its influence into as many spheres as possible. As younger members mature, older members of the family are expected to help them with jobs, introductions, and

financial support. This is not considered corrupt or nepotistic, but is seen rather as one of the benefits of family membership.

Socialization

Infant Care. The role of the mother is extremely important in Iran. Mothers are expected to breast-feed their babies for fear the babies will become "remorseless."

Child Rearing and Education. Mothers and children are expected to be mutually supportive. A mother will protect her children's reputation under all circumstances. Small children are indulged, and not just by their parents. They are magnets for attention from everyone in the society. Some parents worry about their children becoming vain and spoiled, but have a difficult time denying their wishes.

Older children often raise younger children, especially in rural settings. It is very common to see an older child with full responsibility for care of a toddler. Children are usually more than up to this task, and develop strong bonds with their siblings. There is some rivalry between children in a family, but the rule of primogeniture is strong, and older children have the right to discipline younger children.

The father is the disciplinarian of the family. Whereas most fathers dote on their small children, they can become fierce and stern as children approach puberty. It is the father's responsibility to protect the honor of the family, and this means keeping close watch on the women and their activities. A girl is literally a treasure for the family. If she remains chaste, virginal, modest, and has other attributes such as beauty and education she has an excellent chance of making a marriage that will benefit everyone. If she falls short of this ideal, she can ruin not only her own life, but also the reputation of her family.

Boys are far more indulged than girls. Their father teaches them very early, however, that the protection of family honor also resides with them. It is not unusual to see a small boy upbraiding his own mother for some act that shows a lack of modesty. This is the beginning of a lifelong enculturation that emphasizes self-denial, collectivism, and interdependence with regard to the family.

Families place a very strong emphasis on education for both boys and girls. For girls this is a more modern attitude, but it was always true for boys. The education system relies a great deal on rote memorization, patterned as it is on the French education system. Children are also strongly encouraged in the arts. They write poetry and learn music, painting, and calligraphy, often pursuing these skills privately.

Higher Education. All Iranians would like their children to pursue higher education, and competition for university entrance is fierce. The most desired professions for children are medicine and engineering. These fields attract the best and the brightest, and graduates receive an academic social title for both professions (*doktorandmohandess*). The social rewards are so great for success in these professions that families will push their children into them even if their interests lie elsewhere. Many young people receive an engineering or medical degree and then pursue a completely different career.

Etiquette

The social lubricant of Iranian life is a system known *asta'arof*, literally "meeting together." This is a ritualized system of linguistic and behavioral interactional strategies allowing individuals to interrelate in a harmonious fashion. The system marks the differences between *andaruni* and *biruni* situations, and also marks differences in relative social status. In general, higher status persons are older and have important jobs, or command respect because of their learning, artistic accomplishments, or erudition.

Linguistically, *ta'arof* involves a series of lexical substitutions for pronouns and verbs whereby persons of lower status address persons of higher status with elevated forms. By contrast, they refer to themselves with humble forms. Both partners in an interaction may simultaneously use other-raising and self-lowering forms toward each other. Ritual



An Iranian family eating a meal in Shiraj. Even after they leave home, members of extended families have hospitality rights in the homes of their most distant relatives.

greetings and leave-takings such as *asghorban-e shoma* (literally, "your sacrifice") underscore this sensibility.

In social situations, this linguistic gesture is replicated in behavioral routines. It is good form to offer a portion of what one is about to eat to anyone nearby, even if they show no interest. One sees this behavior even in very small children. It is polite to refuse such an offer, but the one making the offer will be sensitive to the slightest hint of interest and will continue to press the offer if it is indicated.

Guests bring honor to a household, and are eagerly sought. When invited as a guest a small present is appreciated, but often received with a show of embarrassment. It will usually not be unwrapped in front of the giver. It is always expected that a person returning from a trip will bring presents for family and friends.

An honored guest is always placed at the head of a room or a table. The highest status person also goes first when food is served. It is proper form to refuse these honors, and press them on another.

One must be very careful about praising any possession of another. The owner will likely offer it immediately as a present. Greater danger still lies in praising a child. Such praise bespeaks envy, which is the essence of the "evil eye." The parent will be alarmed, fearing for the child's life. The correct formula for praising anything is *isma sha' Allah*, literally, "What God wills."

Iranians can be quite physically intimate with same-sex friends, even in public. Physical contact is expected and is not erotic. In restaurants and on buses and other public conveyances people are seated much closer than in the West. On the other hand, even the slightest physical contact with non-family members of the opposite sex, unless they are very young children, is taboo.

A downward gaze in Iran is a sign of respect. Foreigners addressing Iranians often think them disinterested or rude when they answer a question without looking at the questioner. This is a cross-cultural mistake. For men, downcast eyes are a defense measure, since staring at a woman is usually taken as a sign of interest, and can cause difficulties. On the other hand, staring directly into the eyes of a friend is a sign of affection and intimacy.

In Iran the lower status person issues the first greeting. In the reverse logic of *ta'arof* this means that a person who wants to be polite will make a point of this, using the universal

Islamic *salaam* or the extended *salaam aleikum*. The universal phrase for leave-taking is *iskhoda hafez*—"God protect."

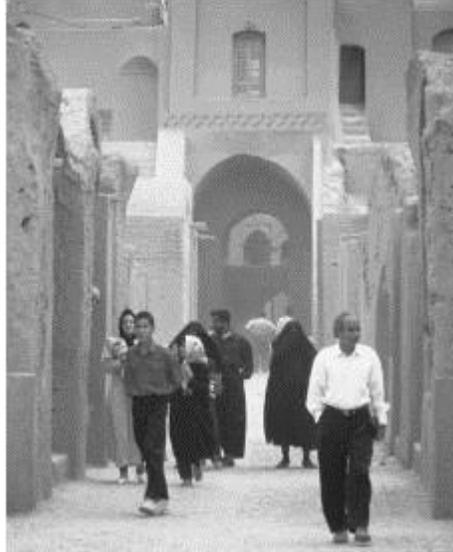
Religion

Religion Beliefs. The state religion in Iran is *Ithnaashara* or Twelver Shi'ism, established by the Safavid Dynasty in the seventeenth century. This branch of Islam has many distinctive practices and beliefs that differ from the Sunni Islam practiced in most of the Muslim world. Shi'a Muslims revere the descendants of Fatimah, daughter of the prophet Muhammad, and her husband, Ali, Muhammad's cousin. There are twelve Imams recognized by this branch of Shi'ism. All were martyred except the twelfth, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who disappeared, but will return at the end of time with Jesus to judge mankind. A common symbol seen throughout Iran is an open hand. This is a complex symbol with a number of interpretations, but one is that the five fingers represent the "five bodies" central to Shi'ism—Muhammad, Fatimah, Ali, and the two sons of Fatimah and Ali, Husayn and Hassain.

It is Hassain, however, who is the true central figure in Iranian symbolic life. Hassain was martyred in a struggle for power between rival sects, later concretized as Shi'a and Sunni. This martyrdom is ritually observed throughout the year on every possible occasion. Pious individuals endow recitation of the story by professional panegyrists on a regular basis. The Islamic months of Muharram and Safar are months of ritual mourning for Hassain, with processions, self-flagellation, and ten-day dramatic depictions of the events of the martyrdom.

Just as Hassain is a central figure, everyone associated with him and his descendants who lived in Iran are equally revered—in particular Imam Reza, the eighth leader of Shi'a Muslims. Whereas all other Shi'a Imams are buried in modern Iraqi territory, Imam Reza is buried in the northeastern Iranian city, Mashhad. His astonishingly lavish shrine is one of the major pilgrimage destinations for Shi'a Muslims.

Although the vast majority of Iranians are Twelver Shi'a Muslims, important religious minorities have always played an important role in Iranian life. Zoroastrians date back to the Achaemenid Empire more than two thousand years ago. Iranian Jews claim to be the oldest continuous Jewish community in the world, dating back to the removal to Babylon. Armenians, an ancient Christian people, were imported by Iranian rulers for their artisanry, and Assyrian Christians, who follow a non-Trinitarian



Local Iranian families tour the mud city of Bam to learn of its history.

doctrine, have been continually resident in Iran since the third century. Sunni Muslims are represented by Arab and Baluchi populations in the south and Turkish populations in the north and west. One religious group is homegrown. The Baha'i movement, a semi-mystical nineteenth-century departure from Shi'ia Islam, won converts not only from Islam, but also from Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. Considered a heresy by many Shi'a Muslims, Baha'i has spread from Iran to virtually every nation on earth.

Religious Practitioners. There is no formal certification for Islamic clergy. Technically, all sincere Muslims can establish themselves as religious practitioners. Women cannot preach to men, but female clerics ministering to women are not uncommon. In the normal course of training a young man attends a religious school. He takes classes from revered scholars who give him a certificate when he has completed a course of study to their satisfaction. After some time he may receive a call to take up residence in a community needing a cleric.

In time, he may acquire a reputation as *amujtahedor* "jurisprudent," capable of interpreting Islamic law. Since there is no fixed theological doctrine in Shi'ism beyond the Koran and the Hadith (traditions of the prophet Muhammad), believers are free to follow the religious leader of their choice, and his interpretation of Islamic law. In time, as a mujtahed gains respect and followers, he may rise to become an ayatollah (literally, Reflection of God"). Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who in the 1970s had the largest number of followers of all religious leaders, led the [Iranian Revolution](#).

Mysticism plays an important role in Iranian religion. Religious orders of Sufi mystics have been active in Iran for many centuries. Sufis focus on an inward [meditative](#) path

for the pursuit of religious truth that may include group chanting and dance. Because they believe religion to be a personal spiritual journey, they eschew the outward trappings of social and economic life, and are highly revered.

Rituals and Holy Places. Shrines of Islamic saints are extremely important in Iranian religious practice. Most of these burial places, which receive regular visits from believers, are purported graves of the descendants of the prophet Muhammad through the Shi'a Imams. A pilgrimage to a local shrine is a common religious and social occasion. Longer pilgrimages to Karbala, Mashhad, or Mecca are greatly respected.

Most holidays in Iran are religious holidays revolving around the birth or death of the various Shi'a Imams. There are thirty of these days, all calculated according to the lunar calendar, which is always at variance with the Iranian solar calendar. This can complicate people's lives. It is necessary to have a Muslim cleric in the community just to calculate the dates. Most of these holidays involve mourning, at which time the story of Hassain's martyrdom at Karbala is recited. The exception is the birthday of the Twelfth Imam, which is a happy celebration.

Medicine and Health Care

Health care in Iran is generally very good. Life expectancy is relatively high (70 years) and the nation does not have any severe endemic infectious diseases. The principal cause of death is heart and circulatory disease. Many physicians emigrated at the time of the Islamic Revolution, but a sufficient number, supplemented by doctors from South Asia, continue to serve the population.

Health care programs in recent years have been highly successful. Malaria has been virtually eliminated, cholera and other waterborne diseases are generally under control, and family planning programs have resulted in dramatic decreases in fertility rates. The infant mortality rate remains somewhat elevated (twenty-nine per thousand) but it has declined significantly over the past twenty years. AIDS figures are suppressed.

Opium addiction has been a continual medical concern in Iran. The Pahlavi regime attempted to phase out its use by licensing the sale of state-produced raw opium only to certified addicts born after a specified date. It was thought that all the addicts would eventually die, and the problem would be solved. Of course, the availability of opium on the free market simply guaranteed that it would be resold to younger people at a profit, and the problem continued. The use of opium persists as a casual drug for all classes of society, with a small proportion of continued addicts.

A folk belief prevalent in Iran revolves around dietary practice. This philosophy tries to maintain balance between the four humors of the body— blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—through judicious combinations of foods. Although more sophisticated Iranians use the full range of four humors in their dietary calculations, most adhere to a two-category system: hot and cold. For example, visitors quickly learn that their friends will not allow the simultaneous consumption of watermelon and yogurt (both cold foods), for fear that this combination will cause immediate death.

Secular Celebrations

Most holidays in Iran are religious in nature. The few secular holidays relate to pre-Islamic practices, or modern political events.

The Iranian New Year's Celebration (*Now Ruz*) is the nation's principal secular holiday. The Now Ruz celebration is replete with pre-Islamic symbolism, beginning with the practice of jumping over bonfires on the Wednesday before the equinox. An array of symbols emphasizing agricultural renewal is displayed throughout the long period of celebration, which lasts for thirteen days. Accompanying the festivities is the celebratory presence of a black-faced clown, *Hajji Firouz*. In some parts of the country a "king" of the New Year is selected and catered to during the holiday. On the thirteenth day he is ritually sacrificed.

In some parts of Iran the winter solstice is celebrated in a special manner. Watermelons are saved from the summer and hung in a protected place. On the longest night of the year, family and friends stay up all night, tell stories, and eat the watermelons.

The nation also celebrates Islamic Republic Day on 1 April to mark the 1979 Revolution.

The Arts and Humanities

Support for the Arts. The role of the arts in Iran is highly complex. On the one hand, Iranians have one of the richest and most elaborate artistic traditions in the world. On the other hand, Islamic leaders disapprove of many forms of artistic expression. Under the Pahlavi regime, especially under the patronage of the empress, Farah Diba, the arts were heavily supported and promoted. Under the Islamic republic this support has continued, but with many fits, starts, and caveats. Moral censorship has invaded virtually every form of artistic expression, but the inventive Iranians somehow manage to produce marvelous art despite these restrictions.

Two Islamic prohibitions affect arts in the most direct way: a prohibition against music, and one against the depiction of humans and animals in art. The prophet Muhammad disapproved of music because it acted to transport listeners to another mental sphere, distracting them from attention to the world created by God. The depiction of humans and animals is disapproved on two grounds: first, because it could be construed as idolatry; and second, because it could be seen as an attempt to create an alternate universe to that created by God. Additionally, the early Muslims considered poetry to be suspect, since it was thought to be inspired by jinn. For these reasons the Koran, certainly one of the most poetic works ever created, is explicitly not poetry. Chanting of the Koran is likewise not music. Over the centuries Iranians have taken these prohibitions somewhat lightly.

Literature. Iranian poets have penned some of the most wonderful, moving poetry in the history of humankind. The great poets Firdawsī, Hāfez, Sa'adī, and Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī and a host of others are an intimate part of the life of every Iranian. Modern poets writing in non-metric styles are equally revered, and the nation has developed a distinguished coterie of novelists, essayists, and exponents of belles lettres, both male and female.

Graphic Arts. Persian miniature paintings illustrating Iranian epics and classic stories are among the world's great art treasures. These miniatures depicted both humans and animals. Another tradition, more religiously approved, is the artistic development of calligraphy. This is a highly developed Iranian art, as it is throughout the Middle East. Iran has its own styles of Arabic calligraphy, however, and has developed many modern artists who fashion common words into figurative art of great beauty. Iran's modern painters often use classic themes from miniatures combined with calligraphy for a uniquely Persian effect. Geometric design is also approved, and is seen in architectural detail and carpet design.

No discussion of Persian art would be complete without mention of carpet making. Carpets are Iran's most important export item after oil, and their creation is an art of the highest order. Carpets are hand-knotted. The finest take years to complete and have hundreds of knots per square inch. The designs are drawn from a traditional stock of motifs, but are continually elaborated upon by weavers. Each region of Iran has its own traditional designs. Carpets are not only beautiful works of art, they are investments. Older carpets are worth more than new carpets. Every Iranian family will try to own one, with the secure knowledge that if they take care in their purchase it will always increase in value.

Also of significance are the centuries-old traditions of silverwork, wood-block printing, enamel ware, inlay work, and filigree jewelry manufacture. These arts were revived during the Pahlavi era in government-sponsored workshops and training programs. This support has continued after the Revolution, and owning excellent examples of these artistic products has become a hallmark of good taste in Iranian homes.

Performance Arts. Persian classical music is one of the most elaborate and inspiring artistic forms ever created. The musical system consists of twelve modal units called *dastgah*. These are divided into small melodic units called *gusheh*, most of which are associated with classic Persian poetic texts. A full performance of classical music consists of alternating arrhythmic and rhythmic sections from a single *dastgah*. The instrumentalist and the vocal artist improvise within the modal structure, creating a unique performance. Traditional instruments include the *tar*, a lute like instrument with a body shaped something like a figure eight; the *setar*, a smaller lute with three strings and a small, round body; the *nei*, a vertical flute; the *kemanche*, a small vertical fiddle with a long neck and a small body; the *qanun*, a larger, broader vertical fiddle; the *santur*, a hammer dulcimer; the *dombak*, a double-headed drum; and the *daf*, a large tambourine. Popular music forms are largely based on the more melodic structures of classical music, and are highly disapproved by the religious authorities. Many popular Iranian musicians now live abroad, where



Pipelines and storage tanks at a gas liquefaction plant in Bandar Mah Shar.

they record and export their music back to Iran. Women are not allowed to perform music in public under the current government.

Iran has two unique traditional dramatic forms. The first, *ta'zieh*, is an elaborate pageant depicting the death of Imam Hassain. In its full form, it lasts ten days during the month of Muharram, and involves hundreds of performers and animals. The other dramatic form is less elevated, but equally unique. It is a comic improvisatory form known commonly as *asru-howzi* theater, because it was typically performed on a platform placed over the pool (*howz*) in a courtyard. Ru-howzi theater is performed by itinerant troupes at weddings and other celebrations, and is greatly appreciated. It has undergone a revival since the Revolution. Modern Western drama entered Iran at the end of the nineteenth century and attracted a number of fine playwrights whose works are regularly performed in live theater and on television.

Iranian film has captured the interest of the entire world in recent years, winning major international prizes. The Iranian film industry is decades old, but in the 1970s it began to develop as a serious art form under the sponsorship of National Iranian Radio and Television. Young film makers remained in Iran after the Revolution to create masterpieces of film art, despite censorship restrictions. This is somewhat confounding for the religious officials of the Islamic republic, since the most conservative officials condemned film attendance as immoral before the Revolution. Now they realize that Iranian film makers give Iran a progressive, positive image, and they grudgingly lend their support to the industry.

The State of the Physical and Social Sciences

Iran has had a long and proud national tradition in [mathematics](#) and the sciences. Iranians view this as an emanation of their cultural heritage. During the period from the ninth to the twelfth centuries the greatest scientists in Baghdad, often thought of as Arabs, were in fact Iranian scholars. [Avicenna](#) (Ibn Sīnā) is perhaps the most famous of these. The high regard for medicine and engineering has produced the strongest education and research programs in the country. More than half of all university students are enrolled in these fields.

There are forty-four universities (fifteen in Tehran) currently active in Iran along with a number of other institutes of higher learning and technical training. Approximately 450,000 students are enrolled, men outnumbering women two to one. The University of Tehran, Tehran Polytechnic University, the University of Isfahan, the University of

Shīrāz, and the University of Tabrīz are premier educational institutions operating at a high international standard.

One of the more interesting developments following the Revolution was the establishment of the Islamic Open University. This was largely due to student discontent with the restrictive admission policies of the existing universities. Set up throughout the country, it is truly a university without walls, enrolling nearly 400,000 students. Although admission examinations are required, it is not necessary for applicants to submit standard high school diplomas for admission.

A third innovation in higher education has been the establishment of a correspondence institution, the Remote University. This is open to everyone, but in practicality it serves primarily government officials, teachers, and civil servants who wish to further their education.

The nation has enough applied scientists to carry out the functions of infrastructure maintenance and health care. Nevertheless, research institutes have suffered severe declines since the Revolution. Many of the country's best scientists and researchers emigrated to Europe and the United States. A few have returned, but the combination of the massive brain drain and the relatively young population of the nation indicate that it will be some time before much rebuilding can take place.

The government has realized that this is a problem and has increased appropriations to research institutes in recent years. The National Research Council formulates national research policy. The Industrial and Scientific Research Organization of the Culture and Higher Education Ministry carries out research for the government. Other institutes, such as the Institute for Theoretical Physics and Mathematics and the Institute for Oceanographic Research, are given little support.

Social science research is somewhat underdeveloped in Iran. Where it exists it has been developed on French models. The University of Tehran has strong faculties in sociology, psychology, and linguistics, and an active Institute for Social Studies and Research. The University of Shīrāz also has instruction and research in [anthropology](#) and sociology.

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—WILLIAMO. BEEMAN