AFCLC

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE
FIELD GUIDE

Iran

U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 is the "Culture General" section, which provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Central Asia.

Part 2 is the "Culture Specific" section, which describes unique cultural features of Iranian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil or visit the AFCLC website at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/.

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ECFG Islamic Republic of Iran

PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as "cultural domains" – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors Across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural

boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

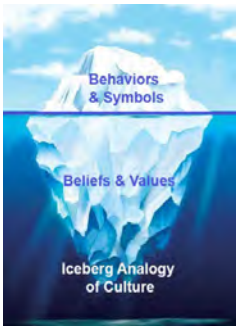
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel through Central Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

Central Asia comprises the land between the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and northwestern China, including Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. As early as 100,000 years ago, humans moved into present-day Iran. Over millennia, people migrated further into the region, living as pastoral nomads in the vast steppe or settling in desert oases. Others established more permanent settlements in parts of Iran and Afghanistan.

Persian Achaemenid King Cyrus II and his heir Darius (both "the Great") gained control of much of Central Asia in the 6-5th centuries BC. Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquered much of the region between 334-325 BC. For the next millennia, empires in present-day northwestern India, Iran, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan controlled parts of Central Asia and the growing trade between China and Europe. The First Turkic Khanate (empire), led by the Kök Türks of Mongolia, gave many Turkic speakers their names after they conquered much of northern Central Asia beginning in the 5th century AD.

Two major events drastically changed Central Asian history: the conversion of most of the population to Islam starting in the 7th century and the invasion by Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire in the 13th century. While the Mongol Empire fragmented into the Il-Khanate (based largely in Iran) – Golden Horde (Kazakhstan

and southern Russia), and Chagatai Khanate (southern Uzbekistan to western China) – some local chiefs, particularly in Afghanistan, established independent principalities. Meanwhile, Central Asian people and settlements remained critical to trade between China, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

While some people, primarily in Iran and Afghanistan, became more sedentary, others to the north retained a semi-nomadic steppe culture. As the khanates began to disintegrate, Timur, a Turkic-Mongol warrior, briefly conquered a vast area between Turkey and India in the late-14th century. By the late-16th century, the semi-nomads of Central Asia were facing mounting pressure from the more urban Chinese and Russians, whose advanced guns had become more lethal than mounted bowmen.

In the mid-18th century, Russia began to conquer Central Asia, though China's Qing dynasty was influential in the East, and polities in Iran and Afghanistan retained varying levels of independence. In the 19th century, Russia and Britain (based in India) vied for regional influence. By the early 20th century, Russia directly ruled or oversaw subordinate khanates in much of Central Asia. While the British used Afghanistan as a buffer state between their Indian colony and the Russians, it was never colonized. Likewise, Iran remained a sovereign state, though it was subject to significant European influence.

By 1911, the Russians had occupied much of Iran and began settling across Central Asia, straining relations with inhabitants, who had fluid identities that did not always correspond to a single ethnicity or nation. When in 1917 Soviet communists gained power in Moscow, Afghanistan became one of the first states to recognize the government. Soon after, the Soviets redrew the map based on ethnically designated territories, creating Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) in the 1920s and 30s. Meanwhile, the British supported the Pahlavi dynasty, which would govern Iran from 1921-79.

Under the Soviets, Central Asians suffered land expropriation, collectivization, violence, famine, and repression. Young males were conscripted into the Red Army, the economy centralized, and traditional values and cultures revised, although welfare, education, and healthcare improved. While communist leaders ruled each SSR through subjugation, strongmen governed Iran and Afghanistan through various monarchic and democratic institutions. Despite the political repression, each Central Asian society retained its own unique culture. In 1979, Iran underwent an Islamic revolution and the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

After a disastrous war, the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 and collapsed 2 years later, ushering in independence for the SSRs. With few exceptions, strongmen there retained power, while the Islamic government endured in Iran. In 1994, the Taliban emerged from the Pakistan-backed anti-communist Mujahideen in Afghanistan and defeated independent tribal strongmen to conquer most of the country by the end of the 20th century. Meanwhile, a violent civil war plagued Tajikistan from 1992-97.

After the 9/11 attacks, US-led Coalition forces fought the Taliban in Afghanistan from 2001-21. As the US and other Western nations began to withdraw, the Taliban regained control. In Iran, conservative, authoritarian Ayatollahs have retained absolute control, developed a nuclear program, and withstood US and international sanctions. Although Kyrgyzstan initially developed democratic institutions, by the early 21st century it had joined the rest of Central Asia by becoming increasingly authoritarian. As of mid-2024, the people and governments of Central Asia seek to balance Russian, Chinese, and Western influence, while asserting sovereign identities rooted in local culture and history.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social

relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. Frequent invasions by Arabs, Turks, Chinese, Mongols, Russians, and others shaped the societies of Central Asia, and each country retains unique social and cultural characteristics.

Afghanistan is the most ethnically diverse country. Pashtuns and Tajiks respectively comprise 42% and 27% with Hazara and Usbek both at 9% of the Afghan population. The other countries have significant majorities that correspond with each primary ethnic identity – for example, Persians in Iran and Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan. Residents of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are the most ethnically homogenous. While ethnic Russians fled much of the region after the Soviet Union's collapse, Kazakhstan retains a relatively large Russian minority at over18%.

Although Central Asian governments are authoritarian, most still hold predetermined elections to legitimize their political control. Under the Taliban, Afghanistan became an Islamic theocracy led by a Supreme Leader and Leadership Council. Likewise, Iran is a theocratic republic with one legislative chamber led by a Grand Ayatollah and elite Islamic jurists. Although the former SSRs are all presidential republics with one or two legislative chambers, governance varies by country. For example, officials compete for power in Kyrgyzstan's flawed democracy, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are essentially dictatorships.

Security threats in Afghanistan are primarily internal. Although violence decreased after the Taliban took power in 2021, the government is fighting multiple insurgencies, and the country is a haven for foreign militants and radical Islamists. Iran is mainly concerned with Israeli conventional cyber and air strikes, though it also faced significant domestic protests during mid-late 2022. In late 2022, a border clash in Vorukh, a Tajik exclave in Kyrgyzstan, erupted between Kyrgyz and Tajiks. With some 100 people killed, it was the deadliest border clash in the former

Central Asian SSRs since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition to frequent border clashes, violence perpetrated by Islamist militants is another security concern in the region.

Russia is the primary foreign and security policy partner in much of Central Asia and maintains military bases across the region. China has become an increasingly significant economic partner, notably through large, state-backed infrastructure projects that comprise part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. While Russia and China wield significant authority in the region, Western and regional powers like Pakistan and Turkey also exert influence in some countries. China, Pakistan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and a few other countries have accepted Afghan diplomats, although much of the world has isolated the Taliban government.

Central Asian countries share similar geographies. Except for Iran, each country is landlocked. The region is characterized by expansive semi-arid grassy steppes, dramatic mountain ranges, and vast deserts. Significant natural and environmental hazards include landslides, avalanches, earthquakes, floods, droughts, melting glaciers, and air and water pollution.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Many of the region's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives, first influenced by animism, the belief that spirits reside in all objects, both animate and inanimate, such as animals, trees, rivers, and rocks. Others practiced shamanism, a religion characterized by a belief in spirits, gods, and demons contacted by practitioners known as shamans. Over time, Central Asia became a meeting place for Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others. Hinduism and Buddhism were influential in the East.

Since its arrival in the 7th century, Islam has been a defining factor in shaping regional cultures and societies, though its adoption varied by community. For example, while most Iranians adopted Islam soon after its initial arrival, many Kyrgyz practiced shamanism well into the 17th century. Today, the vast majority of Central Asians practice Islam. Residents of most countries adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought that emphasizes community consensus and the primacy of the Qur'an over later Islamic teachings. In Iran, by contrast, 90-95% of the population are Shi'a. Given its large ethnic Russian population, Kazakhstan's inhabitants are about 26% Christian, mostly Russian Orthodox.

Religious affiliation is an notable marker of identity in the region. Most Central Asian constitutions provide for freedom of religion and a separation of religion and state. In practice, many officials use religion as a pretext to punish adversaries, whom they consider extremists, or those who practice non-traditional religions. Some adherents find it difficult to practice their faith. The Afghan and Iranian governments are explicitly Islamic, with all laws based on their interpretations of Islamic principles.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin").

A fundamental element of society in much of the region, family may refer to a person's household and extended family, clan (a group of families), or tribe. Family, clan, and tribal connections generally play an important role in an individual's life – they may determine a person's social status, potential marriage partners, business connections, and political prospects. Multiple generations typically reside together in one household, though residence patterns vary between and within countries.

During the first part of the 20th century, Central Asia increasingly urbanized. While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan began to deurbanize in the 1970s, in recent years, the region generally has become more urban. The different urbanization patterns have resulted from Central Asian governments' divergent economic and city-planning policies. Today, only Iran and Kazakhstan are more urban than the global average. As of 2022, nearly all residents of the region have access to electricity. In the same year, about70% of Afghans and 45% of Tajiks lack access to clean drinking water. For every 10 people in Central Asia at least 3 have difficulty finding clean drinking water.

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, traditional and conservative values regarding the family have become increasingly common. Historically, marriage was an arranged union intended to bring both families social and economic advantages. While arranged marriages are still common in some places, especially in Iran and Afghanistan, many regional residents now choose their own spouses, particularly in urban areas. Polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives, is legal for some Muslim inhabitants of Central Asia.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Central Asia's cultures and religions traditionally privilege the male's role as leader and provider. For example, Islamic law favors men over women in inheritance and other family matters. While most inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional gender roles (men as breadwinners and guardians and women as wives and mothers) Soviet-era ideals of women's equality persist in some places, and significant variation exists between countries.

In the former SSRs, nearly all women are literate, compared to about 85% in Iran and 23% in Afghanistan. Likewise, women's completion of post-secondary education varies widely, with over two-thirds of women in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan holding post-secondary degrees, compared to under 2% in Afghanistan. Similarly, well over half of Kazakh women participate in the labor force, compared to about 30-47% in the other former SSRs and less than 19% in Afghanistan and 14% in Iran. .In some countries, Central Asian women are well-represented in lower levels of business and government. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have quotas for women's participation in national and subnational legislatures. Women's political participation is far more restricted in Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. No woman has been head-of-state in Central Asia, except for Roza Otunbayeva, who briefly served as Kyrgyzstan's interim President from 2010-11.

Fertility rates are higher than the global average in every Central Asian country except for Iran. On average, women in the region have about three children. Abortion access varies by country. In the former SSRs, access to abortion is generally unrestricted, while it is legal in Iran and Afghanistan only to save the mother's life. Laws regulating the lives of homosexuals vary by country but tend to be repressive. While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have some homosexual advocacy organizations and safe spaces, social stigma and homophobia are still widespread.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Most of the region's inhabitants speak either an Indo-European or Turkic language. Kazakh and Kyrgyz belong to the Western branch of the Turkic language family, while Turkmen is Southern

and Uzbek Eastern. Persian (spoken primarily in Iran), Dari (Afghanistan, also known as Afghan or Eastern Persian), Pashto (Afghanistan), and Tajik (Tajikistan) all belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. Residents of the former SSRs speak Russian to varying degrees. Although nearly all Kazakhs speak the language, far fewer Tajiks speak it.

While some SSRs managed to largely avoid Russification policies during the Soviet era, others suffered years of linguistic repression, when Russian became the predominant language in most public spaces. Today, Russian is an official language in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, alongside Kazakh and Kyrgyz, respectively. Primarily the language of education and public services, Russian is widely spoken in many cities across much of the region.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) or culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Formal education in the region dates back millennia, particularly in Iran, which became a regional center of scholarship, theology, and philosophy. Medicine and astrology also flourished. In the 10-11th centuries in Uzbekistan, philosopher-scientist Avicenna became a global leader of early medicine, writing influential texts used in the Islamic world and Europe until the 17th century.

As Islam became the predominant religion across Central Asia, ***maktab*** (schools) offered primary and secondary education, and ***madrasas*** (religious schools) higher education, both of which focused on Qur'anic texts and Islamic practices. As Russian and

British influence increased in the 19-20th centuries, educational opportunities expanded, and universities opened across Central Asia. In the SSRs, educational quality and access improved for much of the 20th century until the Soviet Union's collapse.

The former SSRs have nearly 100% literacy. As of 2022, the literacy rates are 89% for Iranians and 37% for Afghans. Government expenditure on education varies by country. While Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan have spent between 3.18-4.2% of GDP on education, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have spent 5.8-8%. Nevertheless, educational outcomes vary significantly. In many, especially rural, regions, girls face more obstacles to attaining an education than boys.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. In much of Central Asia, establishing and maintaining relationships often takes precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner or meeting deadlines. Although residents tend to be more punctual in business settings, meetings frequently begin late, and Central Asians may prefer to deliberate for an extended period before making final decisions.

As in other Islamic societies, men and women in the region often interact differently than Americans are used to. For example, in many parts of Central Asia, unrelated women and men seldom interact, and when they do, it tends to be in group settings. Concepts of personal space also differ from those in the US. For example, Central Asian residents of the same sex commonly sit and stand closer to each other than Westerners do. They may also touch more often during conversations.

Central Asians primarily use the Western calendar, especially when meeting with foreigners, and the former SSRs observe a Monday-Friday workweek. Many residents also use the Islamic

calendar to track Muslim holidays. Because Friday is considered a holy day in Islam, Iran's workweek runs Saturday-Wednesday and Afghanistan's Sunday-Thursday. In addition to the Western and Islamic calendars, many Iranians and Afghans use the Persian solar calendar, for which each new year begins on the spring equinox, a holiday celebrated throughout the region.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill, and style. Much of Central Asia's art, clothing, sport, dance, music, poetry, and pastimes reflect the region's Islamic and multiethnic influences. For centuries, settled Central Asian craftsman were known for miniature paintings, silk embroidery, jewelry, woven carpets, and other luxury goods. Nomadic art typically included decorating useful items like bags, clothing, and tools with semi-precious stones and animal embroidery.

Generally, Central Asian music divides into two styles. The Turkic style in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan traditionally emphasizes vocalization during shamanistic rituals and epic recitation. The Persian style in Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan reflects Persian and Middle Eastern folk and classical styles and instruments. Across the region, variations of lutes and drums are the most common instruments. In much of Central Asia, dance was the domain of shamans, often performed as rituals, though group dances were more common in southern areas.

Common traditional sports are wrestling, equestrian, combat sports, martial arts, and weightlifting. Known as ***buzkashi*** in Afghanistan, a game also popular in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan features two teams of horse-riders, who compete to place a goat carcass in their opponents' goal. More recently, ice hockey and skiing became popular across the region. Today, soccer is widely popular and many Central Asians' favorite sport.

Because of Central Asia's nomadic history and oral traditions, written literature developed slowly in much of the region starting

around the 8th century. However, Iran has a long, rich tradition of literature. Many of its authors and poets, such as Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Rumi, influenced writers across Asia and Europe. Today, poetry remains one of Central Asia's most culturally significant and well-developed literary genres.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Cuisine varies across the region based on local products, tastes, and customs, though common staple ingredients are mutton, lamb, onions, potatoes, carrots, and tomatoes. Central Asians are known for hospitality and large spreads. Bread accompanies almost every meal. Yogurt and other dairy products are common ingredients in many dishes, as are rice and noodles. Hearty soups and stews are prevalent. The most popular beverage is tea, served in many varieties and styles. Observant Muslims in Central Asia consume neither pork nor alcohol, though vodka and ***kumis***, a fermented dairy drink, are popular among many residents of the former SSRs.

Health in the region has improved in recent decades as evidenced by longer life expectancies and decreased infant mortality rates, though significant regional variation persists. Kazakhstan has about 40 physicians per 10,000 people, compared to only three in Afghanistan, and 15-24 in the rest of Central Asia. Non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer present healthcare challenges in the entire region, though Afghanistan also faces high rates of communicable diseases and external causes of death.

In 2020, Central Asia spent rather little on healthcare. Compared to the global average of 10.9%, regional spending ranged from 3.8% of GDP in Kazakhstan to 8.2% in Tajikistan, except for

16.8% in Afghanistan. Public healthcare is often inadequate and access difficult, especially in rural areas. Consequently, many inhabitants lack access to quality treatment. Notably, significant foreign funding for the Afghan government's primary healthcare system was withdrawn after the Taliban took over in 2021.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Since the late-20th century, Central Asia has endured economic difficulties. The former SSRs have faced recession and transition from centrally planned to more market-oriented economies. Iran has endured US and international economic sanctions, resulting in relative economic and financial isolation. Afghanistan underwent 20 years of war and faces isolation from international donors on which it depended heavily. Living standards vary widely. While residents in Afghanistan and Tajikistan are some of the world's poorest, real per-capita GDP in Kazakhstan is over $26,100.

Earnings from commodity exports like oil, natural gas, gold, and cotton comprise a large share of the regional economy. Central Asian countries receive significant foreign investment, especially in the oil, natural gas, and mining sectors, and remittances from citizens working abroad. Apart from Afghanistan, which trades mainly with South Asia and the Middle East, most countries primarily export to Russia, China, and Europe. Central Asia depends on China and Russia for imports and investment, and the region is vital to the success of China's Belt and Road Initiative, through which some countries are indebted to China.

As of mid-2024, the region's economic outlook is unclear, largely due to the ongoing effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While experts predict sustained growth for the region's energy exporters, given the relatively high price of oil and natural gas,

the anticipated negative and slowing growth in Russia and China, respectively, will likely impact Central Asia's economies.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Roads form the primary infrastructure in the region, though quality tends to deteriorate in rural areas. While Iran and Kazakhstan have Central Asia's largest rail systems, new routes are planned to connect the region with China and Pakistan. Because Iran is the only country with a coast, Central Asia relies on road and rail networks through neighboring states for access to sea shipping routes.

Iran is one of the world's largest producers of oil and natural gas, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan natural gas, and Kazakhstan oil and coal. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan meet nearly all their energy demand with hydropower. While water is becoming scarcer in many areas, progress towards increasing wind and solar resources' share of the energy supply is limited by a focus on fossil fuel production.

Kyrgyzstan is the only country with relative freedom of press and expression. Media in Iran and Turkmenistan are some of the world's least free. Shared issues are self-censorship, repression and violence against journalists, and state control of the media and Internet. Although information technology has spread in recent years, Internet usage varies. While a majority of Kazakhs (92%) and Iranians (79%) access the Internet, usage is well below the global average in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Central Asia had 99-165 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in 2022, except for Afghanistan at 57. While mobile coverage has expanded rapidly, employment of new technologies like 5G networks lags many other regions.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Central Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Iran.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Formerly known as Persia, Iran has been the center of powerful empires that controlled strategically important land between the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf for millennia. Since an Islamic revolution in 1979, powerful clerics, who control the country's political, economic, and cultural spheres, have ruled Iran as a Shi'a theocracy. Today, Iran influences political and security affairs in the Middle East and Central and South Asia, often clashing with other regional and Western powers.

Early History

Archeological evidence indicates that humans inhabited present-day Iran as early as 100,000 years ago. Around 2700 BC, the Elam civilization emerged as a regional power, centered around Susa in southwestern Iran. While eventually defeated, the Elamites expanded their territory westward, warring with their powerful Assyrian and Babylonian neighbors.

Median Kingdom

Around 1300, Proto-Indo-European language speakers known as Medians and Persians moved into Iran. The larger of the two groups, the Medians founded a kingdom in northern Iran around 700 and allied with the Babylonians to the southwest to vanquish the Assyrians from the region. Taking advantage of this victory, the Medians expanded their territory to the northwest and eventually reached the Lydian kingdom in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey).

While the Medians expanded northward, the Persians founded the Achaemenid kingdom to the south, based in the present-day province of Fars (or Pars). The term "Persian," which refers to

Iranian culture, language, and ethnicity, comes from the name of this province (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*).

Cyrus the Great and the Achaemenid Empire

While the Achaemenids began as a vassal state (secondary to a dominant state) to their Median neighbors, King Cyrus II (the Great) quickly consolidated power. Around 550 BC, Cyrus attacked and defeated the Medians, increasing Achaemenid regional influence. Cyrus continued to expand his territory, venturing into Asia Minor and taking Lydian-held Greek cities. The Achaemenids also turned against the neighboring Babylonians, expanding westward into the Levant (the region comprising present-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories) and Egypt.

Darius and Xerxes: After the early death of Cyrus's heir, Achaemenid General Darius (the Great) took control of the kingdom after quelling internal revolts in 521. Darius was a skilled leader, who consolidated power in the vast territories that his predecessors had conquered. He took control of present-day northern India and territory by the Black and Caspian Seas.

When Darius died in 486, his son Xerxes took control of the Achaemenid Empire and continued expanding north and west. In 480, Xerxes defeated forces from the city-states of Athens and Sparta at the battle of Thermopylae, expanding Persian influence into Europe's Balkan Peninsula. Notably, during the Achaemenid period, Persian rulers began to use the term ***Shahanshah*** (king of kings). While the title would be used intermittently in the following centuries, often simplified to ***shah*** (king), Persian kings used it to tie their lineages to Achaemenid royalty.

Greek Invasions: After Xerxes's death in 465, Achaemenid kings failed to sustain the empire's territory. Revolts in Egypt and military defeats in Greece diminished Persian power. Internal revolts from ***satraps*** (governors) further weakened the army's capacity to respond to threats, allowing Alexander the Great of

Macedonia to expand eastward from Greece into Iran in 334. Alexander had defeated the disorganized Persian forces by 330.

Following his death in 323 BC, Alexander's generals divided his empire, with Seleucus I Nicator gaining control of Iran and establishing the Seleucid dynasty. Seleucid rulers were largely concerned with their Levantine holdings and mostly ignored their eastern territories. As with the Achaemenids, *satrap* rebellions challenged the Seleucids and their hold over Iran.

The Parthians

During the Seleucid era, groups of nomads, notably the Parni, moved into northern Iran around 250. While the Parni initially accepted Seleucid rule, their skilled horsemen mounted attacks against their Greek overlords. By 247, the Parni had founded Parthia, an autonomous kingdom that sought to invade Seleucid holdings in Babylon (present-day Iraq). Initial successes led the Parthians (also referred to as the Arsacids) to expand further into the Caucasus Mountains and Asia Minor, just as the Medians and Achaemenids had before them.

However, the Parthians encountered the Romans, a new power in Asia Minor, who had begun to build their empire in central Italy around 500 BC and subsequently expanded around 264 BC. The Romans were a powerful enemy that withstood repeated Persian attempts to control the Levant and Caucasia. For the next 3 centuries, conflicts with the Roman Empire weakened the Parthians, who eventually allowed their territories to devolve into autonomous kingdoms.

The Sassanids

With the Parthians unable to effectively govern Iran, one of their vassal kingdoms in Fars revolted to seize greater political control. In 224 AD, Ardashir, King of the Sassanids, killed the last Parthian ruler and became the first ruler to take the title of "*Shahnashah* of the Iranians." Like the Parthians, the Sassanids vied with the Romans for greater influence in Asia Minor and Caucasia. In 285, when the Roman emperor reorganized his holdings into western and eastern divisions, the Sassanids

continued their competition for regional influence with the Eastern (Byzantine) Roman Empire.

The Sassanid court notably endorsed Zoroastrianism (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), a belief system that had been present in Iran since before Darius the Great but grew with Sassanid state support. Zoroastrian clergy wielded significant influence at court and used their sway to slow the spread of Christianity, which had recently spread into the region.

Several Sassanid kings became known for good governance. Bahram V, crowned in 421 AD, granted freedom of religion to Christians and ushered in a long period of peace, becoming a semi-mythical figure in Persian history. Likewise, scholars note Khosrow I's reign, starting in 531, specifically for territorial expansion towards the Black Sea. Finally, under Khosrow II, the Persians amassed great wealth by raiding the Byzantine Empire.

Arab Invasions

While Sassanid raids into the Byzantine Empire brought wealth to Iran, Byzantine reprisals in the Levant severely weakened the Sassanids. Meanwhile, a new religion, Islam, was gaining converts in the Arabian Peninsula (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Muslim Arab warriors expanded into Iran in 636 and had completed their conquest of the region by 642 by ending the Sassanid Empire. In subsequent centuries, rival Islamic dynasties competed for control of the ***Ummah*** (community of Muslim believers – see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The most influential of these dynasties in Iran was the Arab Abbasid Caliphate. Founded in Baghdad (present-day Iraq's capital) in 750, the Abbasids initially controlled vast swaths of territory stretching from North Africa to South Asia.

Persian culture underwent many changes under the Abbasids, notably their use of the Arabic script for written Persian (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). In turn, the Abbasid Caliphate adopted many Persian customs.

The Persian Intermezzo

In the 9th century, infighting weakened the Abbasids, allowing Iranian rulers to establish autonomous kingdoms under nominal Abbasid rule. These groups, notably the Saffarids, Tahrids, and Samanids, ushered in a period of self-rule. Scholars refer to this era as the Persian Intermezzo, which lasted about 2 centuries and brought a flowering of local Persian culture and literature.

Seljuk Invasions

In 1055, Turkic Seljuks swept southwards from the Aral Sea (in present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), invading Baghdad, and instituting a puritanical form of Sunni Islam (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality)*. The Seljuks took territory in the Levant, Asia Minor, Central Asia, and Persia. However, ***atabegs*** (local nobles) ruled smaller fiefdoms independently of their Seljuk overlords, particularly in Fars. Some of the most notable *atabegs* were the Kwarezm-Shahs, who controlled most of Iran in the 12th century.

Mongol Rule

Seljuk rule was short-lived, as Mongols invaded Iran in 1220 and 1256. Known for their destruction, Mongol horsemen razed entire cities in northern and eastern Iran. In 1258, they sacked Baghdad and established the Il-Khanid dynasty. While the Il-Khans depended on the Persian bureaucracy that had once served the Abbasid caliphs, Mongol rulers brought their own traditions to Iran. Timur (also known as Tamerlane), a Turkic-Mongol warrior, ousted the Il-Khans in 1383. Timur's rule was renowned for its violence, as he used Iran as a vassal territory to pillage. After Timur died in 1405, his Timurid dynasty continued to rule the region.

The Safavid Dynasty

In northwestern Iran, members of the Safavid order, adherents of the Twelver branch of Shi'a Islam (see p. 6-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*), took advantage of the Timurids' weakening hold on Iran to invade in 1501. With the help of Turkic warriors, the Safavids began a decade-long conquest of the region. Claiming

religious authority as a descendant of Shi'a Imams (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*), a young charismatic prince named Ismail led the Safavids. The popular ruler inspired a large following and was able to consolidate control of Iran.

After Ismail's death in 1524, weak Safavid rulers jeopardized many of the dynasty founder's advancements. In 1588, Shah Abbas began to reverse these losses, recapturing Iranian territory that the Ottoman Turks and Uzbeks had taken. Likewise, he created a standing army and reorganized the tax system. Shah Abbas moved his capital to Esfahan, where royal investments and largescale construction projects were symbols of a cultural blossoming. During this period, Shi'a Islam became predominant in Iran, where it would remain the most prevalent branch of Islam through today.

After Shah Abbas's death in 1629, the Safavid Empire became increasingly difficult to manage. Safavid vassals in present-day Afghanistan challenged the Shah and overran Esfahan in 1722. However, in 1729, Safavid General Tahmasp Qoli expelled the Afghan invaders from Iran. With control of the entire region, Qoli ruled under a puppet Safavid Shah until 1736, when he crowned himself Nadir Shah. The new Shah used warfare in India to raise funds, capturing the Indian Mughal Emperor and returning with tremendous spoils. While his court grew wealthy, Nadir Shah's constant military campaigns were unpopular, and a group of his officers and relatives assassinated him in 1747.

The Qajar Dynasty

In 1796, the Qajars of northwestern Iran succeeded Nadir Shah, ruling from the new capital of Tehran after a prolonged struggle with the Zands, a rival power that originally filled the power vacuum left after Nadir Shah's death. The Qajar court quickly proved unable to rule effectively. European powers, notably Russia and Britain, were increasingly interested in colonial enterprises in the region and exploited the weak shahs. In the first half of the 19th century, the Russian Empire defeated Iran

in a series of wars and seized Caucasian territories in present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, threatening the Persian sphere of cultural and military influence.

Qajar mismanagement also caused economic turmoil. As most of Iran's exports were primary goods, global price fluctuations adversely affected many merchants. To cushion against this instability, the Qajar shahs accepted British subsidies in exchange for many demands. This reliance increased as the court gave European firms concessions to exploit Iran's natural resources, particularly during Nasser al-Din Shah's reign from 1848-96.

By the start of the 20th century, Iran had become a semi-colonial state under the Qajars, as European elites controlled many Iranian businesses and resources. Iran's reduced standing made the Qajars widely unpopular, particularly among Shi'a ***ulema*** (clerics versed in religious law and theology), who allied with domestic business leaders against foreign intervention.

Constitutional Revolution

In 1890-91, discontent with the ruling Qajars emerged when news broke of plans to sell Iran's tobacco monopoly. The *ulema* and business leaders channeled popular anger into riots that forced Iran's new ruler, Muzaffar al-Din Shah, to open the country's first parliament, the ***Majles*** (see p. 4-5 of *Political and Social Relations*), and issue the first constitution in 1906.

However, successive shahs were hostile to the *Majles* and tried to dissolve it. When the legislature's appointed financial advisor angered British and Russian interests in Iran by promoting reforms that threatened their firms, Russian forces occupied much of Iran in 1911 until the 1914 start of World War I (WWI).

WWI

As European powers were drawn into WWI, Iran was severely politically and economically weakened. The conflict, which pitted

the Allies (Britain, Russia, France, and the US) against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire), resulted in foreign powers hostile to nationalist reforms occupying much of the country.

Iran's proximity to British India, Russian holdings in Caucasia, and the Ottoman Empire made it impossible to escape the war. The northwestern region of Iranian Azerbaijan was an active warzone, with British and Russian troops fighting Ottoman forces that had attempted to make inroads into the area. Physical destruction of northern Iran and the seizure of grain by occupying forces led to famine, during which an estimated 2 million people starved to death between 1917-18.

Reza Khan

After WWI, the *Majles* rejected an offer to make Iran a British protectorate. However, the British supported Reza Khan, a military officer, who had quelled a communist uprising in northern Iran. Staging a coup in 1921, Reza Khan ruled the country under a puppet shah until 1925, when he deposed the last Qajar ruler and crowned himself Reza Shah Pahlavi, thereby establishing the Pahlavi dynasty that would govern Iran for the next 6 decades.

Reza Shah established a secular state, stripping clerics of much of their power to create secular courts, opening secular schools (see p. 2-3 of *Learning and Knowledge*), and banning veils on women (see p. 1 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). He modernized the economy, built national rail and road networks, expanded the oil sector, and established banks and universities. Despite implementing some social changes, the new Shah kept a tight grip on Iran's politics, banning political parties and labor unions, while censoring the press. In 1935, Reza Shah requested that foreign powers refer to the country as Iran instead of Persia.

In the late 1930s, Reza Shah increased ties with Nazi Germany to counter British influence. After the 1939 outbreak of World War II, the Allies (Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the US)

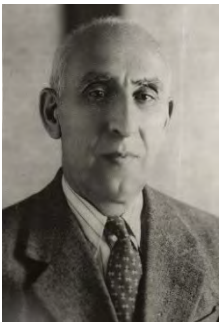
rejected Iranian-German relations. In 1941, as the US military sought to transport equipment through Iran to the Soviet Union, the British and Soviet armies invaded Iran and forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

Political Instability

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi came to the throne with less authority than his father. The departure of Reza Shah and presence of foreign troops until 1946 enabled greater political participation. Various political factions and the *ulema*, resenting the social reforms that the Shah's father implemented, gained influence. After a 1949 constituent assembly, a broad coalition of left-wing activists, nationalists, and clerics joined as the National Front to demand policies that prioritized Iranian interests over those of the European elite that the Shah had traditionally favored.

1953 Coup: The National Front became a dominant force in politics, and the Shah appointed one of its leaders, Mohammed Mosaddegh, as Prime Minister (PM) in 1951. Soon after gaining power, Mosaddegh nationalized Iran's oil industry (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*), angering Western oil companies. Britain established an economic embargo on Iran and worked with the US and Iranian political factions to stage a coup.

In 1953, the US, Britain, and some of their Iranian allies fostered public unrest, bribing the media to circulate propaganda to stage their coup. After the military arrested Mosaddegh, the Shah appointed a PM friendlier to Western interests. While the coup paved the way for more than 2 decades of pro-Western leadership in Iran, many Iranians resented the intervention and opposed the Shah.



The White Revolution

After the political turmoil of his early reign, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi tightened his control of Iran. The Shah established the ***Sazman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*** (Intelligence and Security Organization of the Country, or SAVAK – the secret police), trained in part by the US and Israel, which violently suppressed political dissent.

In 1961, the Shah introduced the "White Revolution," a massive socio-economic overhaul of Iran. Reforms resulted in improved gender equity, literacy, and public health. The government undertook massive land reform policies, breaking up large landholdings and parceling out estates to individual farmer families. Rapid growth of the oil sector also brought significant wealth to Iran, creating some dislocations and unrest. Much of the *ulema* rejected the proposed social reforms and the breakup of religious landholdings that had provided income for the clerics. Failed farms and the dispossession of landless peasants forced many young men from rural areas to seek work in Iran's cities, creating a class of disgruntled urban youth isolated from traditional family structures (see p. 2 of *Family and Kinship*).

The Islamic Revolution

By the late 1970s, inflation had begun to impact many Iranians. Economic stagnation and lack of political participation led many to protest the government. Various urban youth became supporters of the anti-government speeches of Ayatollah (a title given to high-ranking clerics) Ruhollah Khomeini, whom the Shah had exiled in 1964.

In late 1977, a coalition of Islamists, leftists, and nationalists demanded an end to the Shah's rule. After the government reacted violently to protests, popular discontent grew further. Demonstrations that Khomeini coordinated from abroad became more frequent. In early 1979, faced with worsening unrest, the Shah fled Iran in exile. With a provisional government unable to function, the Iranian Army declared its neutrality, allowing for a political transition. In February 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran with massive support and took control.

Khomeini quickly appointed a new transitional government to hold a referendum that ratified Iran's new status as an Islamic Republic (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*). He became

Iran's first ***Rahbar*** (leader) and developed a new theocratic system. Empowered by the electoral mandate, clerics excluded secular politicians from political power. Pro-government militias jailed or executed many political activists, especially communists and socialists, perceived as enemies of the Islamic Revolution.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, a paramilitary group loyal to the Ayatollah) and mosque-based ***komitehs*** (committees) began patrolling urban areas to enforce adherence to their strict interpretation of Islamic dress codes and behavior (see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*). During this time, much of Iran's educated elite emigrated to the US and Europe.

The Iran Hostage Crisis: In late 1979, pro-Khomeini students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and took 66 US citizens hostage. The kidnappers demanded the US cease interfering in Iranian affairs and extradite the exiled Shah, who had sought medical treatment in New York. Negotiations for the hostages' return were difficult, and the prolonged situation became a political crisis for US President Jimmy Carter's administration. In early 1980, a botched military expedition to recover the hostages resulted in the deaths of eight US servicemembers.

After the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, diplomats resumed talks to free the hostages in exchange for relief from sanctions that the US and its allies had placed on the new government. After 444 days in captivity, Iran released the US hostages in 1981.

The Iran-Iraq War

Meanwhile, Saddam Hussein, leader of neighboring Iraq, capitalized on the instability in Iran and invaded Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan Province in late 1980. Compounding the attack, Iraq financed Iranian dissident groups that began a bombing campaign to lower morale and assassinate high-ranking clerics and politicians. In response, the IRGC crushed dissent with even more violence than previously seen under the Shah's SAVAK.

Despite suffering initial setbacks, the Iranian Army regrouped. By 1982, Iranian forces had recaptured territory lost to Iraq. In 1983, the conflict devolved into a war of attrition that would last for 5 more years and cause thousands of civilian casualties in both countries. The war also reduced oil production, causing global oil shortages and price surges that led to widespread discontent.

Iran-Contra Affair: In 1985, Oliver North and others in US President Ronald Reagan's administration coordinated the sale of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, then led by PM Mir-Hossein Mousavi, hoping to induce Iranian-backed militias to free Americans taken hostage in Lebanon. The covert arms sale was counter to stated US foreign policy of not supporting Iran, as the US had designated it a state-sponsor of terrorism. News broke of these sales and that the US government used part of the proceeds to fund the right-wing Contra opposition to a leftist government in Nicaragua in 1986, sparking the "Iran-Contra" scandal that tarnished the Reagan administration's reputation.

In 1988, faced with international pressure to resume peacetime levels of oil production, both Iraq and Iran agreed to a United Nations-backed ceasefire and retreated to their original borders.

Post-War Iran

Upon the 1989 death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Assembly of Experts (see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*) appointed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, then serving as Iran's President, as *Rahbar*. The new President, Hashemi Rafsanjani, was a practical politician, who hoped that measured liberalization would draw foreign investment to rebuild Iran after the war. Regardless, the *Rahbar* blocked many of Rafsanjani's liberal policy proposals and instead constrained anti-government protests that had begun to emerge.

During this period, activity on Iran's nuclear program, which had been halted after the 1979 Revolution, resumed with vigor. While

Iran maintained that the enrichment of radioactive material was for peaceful energy production instead of weapons manufacture, repeated refusals to allow international inspectors into the country led to US sanctions.

Mohammed Khatami: The push for reform continued under President Mohammed Khatami, who won a landslide electoral victory in 1997. Khatami initially allowed greater freedom of press, a move that Khamenei reversed. Tension between reformists in the elected government and the clerics grew in 2000, when more reformists were elected to the *Majles*.

Having run on a platform of reformist policies, Khatami was reelected in 2001. As clerics opposed various policy proposals, periodic protests erupted throughout Khatami's term, highlighting a growing political divide. The Council of Guardians (see p. 4-5 of *Political and Social Relations*) highlighted these divisions, when they disqualified roughly half of eligible candidates for the 2004 *Majles* elections, resulting in a conservative governing coalition.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: After the Council of Guardians barred most reformist candidates from running in the subsequent presidential election, Tehran's conservative mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected President in 2005. While initially gaining close relations with many clerics, Ahmadinejad's aggressive support of Iran's nuclear program angered many officials, who feared such action would lead to increased sanctions.

However, Ahmadinejad improved relations with Iraq after the US-led coalition invasion in 2003. Thereafter, Iran would play an increasingly larger role in Iraqi politics, in part to counter US regional influence (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*). In the late 2000s, Ahmadinejad struggled to contain inflation and unemployment (see p. 2-3 of *Economics and Resources*), which jeopardized his 2009 reelection chances. After observers

reported extensive election irregularities, large protests known as the Green Movement erupted, calling for the President's removal, though the security forces quashed the demonstrations and supported Ahmadinejad's victory. Public distrust marked much of the President's second term, with protests becoming increasingly common.

Hassan Rouhani: In 2013, Hassan Rouhani, a moderate, was elected President. Rouhani's election was considered a rebuke of the previous administration and signaled a period of relative reform. Rouhani used his electoral mandate to negotiate the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA – see p. 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*), an agreement with the US and other countries that limited Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. Following the deal's ratification, many moderates were elected to the *Majles*, signaling public support for the JCPOA. Running on a reformist agenda, Rouhani was reelected in 2017.

While the sanctions relief improved some conditions in Iran, few citizens benefitted. From 2017-18, protests and labor strikes demanded greater political participation and better working conditions. These protests intensified after the US pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposed sanctions, deepening the economic strain as inflation rose to its highest rate in decades.

In 2020, the Council of Guardians disqualified nearly 7,000 centrist and reformist candidates from the *Majles* election. This event, along with a growth in nationalism following the US assassination of the head of the IRGC Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, in Iraq led to the election of a conservative legislature. Rouhani's position weakened further with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health)*.

Ebrahim Raisi: In mid-2021, the nation's Chief Justice Ibrahim Raisi, was elected President. Raisi is known for his hardline conservative views and closeness to Ayatollah Khamenei. In

2019, the US imposed economic sanctions on the President due to his human rights record, particularly for his role in mass executions that occurred in the late 1980s. While the US has since sought to reintroduce an agreement like the JCPOA, Iran's government has demanded greater concessions, including the lifting of all US sanctions and the withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Iranians have adapted myths from ancient pre-Islamic Persian religious stories and more contemporary folktales.

The Story of Zal: The story of King Zal and his descendants is recorded in the ***Shahnameh,*** an 11th-century mythical epic of Iran. Born to a royal family, Zal's father, who believed Zal's white hair signaled demonic possession, abandoned him in the Alborz Mountains. The Simorgh, a benevolent mythical bird, found and raised Zal, nurturing him until he matured and was reclaimed by his repentant father. As a parting gift, the Simorgh gave Zal golden feathers to summon her if ever needed.

Zal then married Princess Rudabeh, who became pregnant soon after. As Rudabeh suffered a difficult childbirth, Zal burned one of his feathers to summon the Simorgh. When she appeared, the Simorgh transmitted her medical knowledge to humanity, saving the Princess and her son, Rostam, one of the main characters of the *Shahnameh*. Rostam grew into adulthood in just a few weeks to become a mythical hero, successfully completing a series of fabled feats of strength and heroism. As a result, Rostam became a ***negahban*** (protector) of the monarchy, spending his life defending weak Persian kings from their enemies, particularly foreign invaders from the East.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Islamic Republic of Iran
Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran
جمهوری اسلامی ایران
(Persian)

Political Borders

Coastline: 1,516 mi
Turkmenistan: 713 mi
Afghanistan: 572 mi
Pakistan: 602 mi
Iraq: 994 mi
Turkey: 332 mi
Armenia: 27 mi
Azerbaijan: 428 mi

Capital

Tehran

Demographics

Iran's population of about 88.3 million is growing at an annual rate of 0.88%. The population concentrates in the North and West. Central and eastern desert regions are more sparsely populated.

Flag

Adopted in 1979, the flag consists of three equal horizontal bands of green, white, and red. The middle of the white band features the national emblem that represents the word ***Allah*** (God) in the shape of a red tulip. The phrase ***Allah Akbar*** ("God is great") is repeated in Arabic script along the borders of both the red and green bands. The green color represents Islam and growth, white symbolizes honesty and peace, and red stands for bravery and martyrdom.

Geography

Located in Central Asia, Iran borders the Caspian Sea to the north, Turkmenistan to the northeast, Afghanistan to the east, Pakistan to the southeast, the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf to the south and southwest, Iraq to the west, and Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to the northwest. Strategically located on the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, Iran is adjacent to vital maritime waterways for crude oil transport. Iran's total land area is about 636,372 sq mi, almost 2.5 times the size of Texas.

Iran is geographically diverse, with sporadic plains along both coastlines, a central plateau, and a high mountainous rim along Iran's northern and western borders. The central plateau contains two large salt deserts, ***Dasht-e Lut*** and ***Dasht-e Kavir***.

Iran shares its longest river, the Aras (666 mi), with Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The Karun (590 mi) in southwestern Iran is the country's only permanently navigable river. Major saltwater lakes are Urmia, the world's third largest, and Namak. Iran shares the Caspian Sea, the world's largest inland body of water, with Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

The Zagros Mountains stretch from the northwestern borders with Turkey and Iraq to the Strait of Hormuz in the South. In the North, the Elburz Mountains run by the Caspian Sea. Mount Damavand, part of the Elburz, is the country's highest peak and Asia's highest volcano (18,605 ft).

Climate

Iran's climate ranges from subtropical to subpolar due to varied elevation, latitude, seasonal winds, maritime influences, and proximity to mountains or deserts. The North and West tend to have four distinct seasons. Spring and autumn are shorter in the East and South, typically with mild winters and hot summers. Although most of Iran experiences dry summers, the northern coast often has close to 100% humidity. August temperatures vary from an average of 81°F along the Caspian Sea to 125°F in the Southwest near Iraq. In Tehran, the average low is 36°F in January, and the average high is 84°F in

July. From February-October, winds can reach velocities of 70 mph in the East. Annual precipitation varies widely. While areas near the Caspian Sea receive about 78 in, parts of the Southeast receive less than 2 in.

Natural Hazards

Iran is located on three active fault lines and a dry belt (region with desert and arid lands), making it prone to natural disasters such as frequent serious earthquakes, floods, droughts, landslides, and sandstorms. In addition, water scarcity, severe droughts, and floods caused by climate change pose serious threats to residents. About 36% of cities are in flood-prone areas, and nearly 77% in high-risk earthquake zones. In 2020, desert locusts damaged about 4.8 million tons of agricultural products. In late 2021, two powerful earthquakes with magnitudes of 6.4 and 6.3 hit southern Iran.

Environmental Issues

Air pollution from vehicle emissions, oil refineries, power plants, and factories cause significant environmental damage. Tehran is one of the world's most polluted large cities, and thousands of residents die from air pollution each year. Other issues include deforestation, overgrazing, desertification, oil pollution in the Gulf, wetland losses from drought, and inadequate water supply. Methods to introduce renewable energy sources and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions have remained mostly unexplored in Iran, contributing adversely to climate change.

Government

Iran is a theocratic republic with one legislative chamber. The former monarchy and Constitution of 1906 were abolished after the Revolution in 1979 (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). The first leader of post-revolutionary Iran, Grand Ayatollah (a title given to high-ranking clerics) Ruhollah Khomeini, implemented the ***velayat-e faqih*** (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) system of state rule by Islamic jurists (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The current constitution, adopted in 1979 and amended in 1989,

provides clergy with oversight of the executive, legislature, and judiciary. Local government divides into 31 ***ostanha*** (provinces), which subdivide into ***shahrestanha*** (counties), ***bakhshha*** (districts), and ***dehestanha*** (townships). The President appoints the Minister of Interior (MoI), which the legislature approves. The MoI appoints all provincial governors-general, county governors, and city mayors. City councilmen are locally elected, and a village master advised by elders administers villages.

Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President and Supreme Leader, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of Iran's Armed Forces. The Assembly of Experts, an 88-member body of Islamic jurists elected by popular vote to serve 8-year terms, appoints the Supreme Leader for life. His powers include appointing senior military and Revolutionary Guard Corps officers (see "Defense" below) and clerical members of both the Council of Guardians, a 12-member body of jurists responsible for reviewing the constitutionality of all legislation, approving electoral candidates, and overseeing elections, and the judiciary. He also appoints members of the Committee to Determine the Expediency of the Islamic Order, which arbitrates disagreements between the Council of Guardians and the legislature. As Iran's most powerful official, Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei has held this position since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989.

The President is head-of-government, elected by popular vote to serve a 4-year term. If no candidate receives a majority in the initial round of voting, a run-off is held. The President must be a native-born Iranian Shi'a Muslim (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Masoud Pezeshkian was elected Presidentin July 2024. Among other duties, the President selects a Council of Ministers, or cabinet, for approval by the legislature, is Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Security, and responsible for implementing laws and government administration.

Legislative Branch

The one-chamber legislature is the ***Majles-e Shura-ye Eslami*** (Islamic Consultative Assembly), also known as the Islamic Parliament or just *Majles,* consisting of 290 seats. Recognized religious and ethnic minorities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Armenians, have one seat each. The *Majles* enacts all legislation and can impeach the President with a two-thirds majority vote. Members serve 4-year terms. Although elected by the public, all candidates of the *Majles* are first approved by the Council of Guardians. While the Supreme Leader appoints half of the Council of Guardians, which can veto legislature, the judiciary nominates and the *Majles* elects the other half.

Judicial Branch

Iran's legal system is primarily based on ***sharia*** (Islamic law) derived from Shi'a principles (see p. 6-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The judiciary consists of a Supreme Court, High Judicial Council (HJC), and lower courts. The Supreme Court reviews decisions of lower courts. The head of the HJC, appointed by the Supreme Leader, appoints the Supreme Court President and Prosecutor General, who must be ***mujtahids*** (clergymen, who have earned the privilege of interpreting laws). The HJC consists of five members, who serve 5-year renewable terms. They include the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, prosecutor general, and three other clergy chosen by religious jurists.

Other courts include Penal Courts I and II, Islamic Revolutionary Courts, Courts of Peace, and Military Courts. The Islamic Revolutionary Courts hear and try charges of terrorism and offenses against national security, the rulings of which cannot be appealed. A Special Clerical Court functions outside the judicial system, handling cases involving clerics.

The penal code of 1983 employs traditional punishments and retributions. For example, a relative of a murdered party may take the life of the killer with court approval. Violent punishments, like execution, are now required for a variety of crimes, notably adultery and homosexuality (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*).

Political Climate

Although political parties were legally recognized in 1998, official political activity is permitted only to groups that accept the principle of *velayat-e faqih.* The regime limits political opposition by controlling which candidates run in elections, creating a guise of democracy. Today, conservative groups dominate politics with the support of Supreme Leader Khamenei. Political parties that retain government favor are the Resistance Front of Islamic Iran, Executives of Construction Party, Islamic Law Party, and Combatant Clergy Association. Many opposition parties, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, Holy Warriors for the People Party, and Tudeh Party, are outlawed.

Many Iranians believe the political system is corrupt and rigged in favor of powerful groups that perpetuate tensions with the West to distract the public from domestic problems. Protests began in mid-2021 in response to a drought in Khuzestan, which was once rich in water. The protests spread to other provinces and became political, calling for the end of the regime, economic improvement, and better resource management. Many activists, protestors, and bystanders, including children, were arrested and suffered disappearance, torture, and other ill-treatment. The ***Basij*** ("The Mobilization"), also known as the *Basij* Resistance Forces – a volunteer paramilitary group that focuses on internal security, moral policing, and law enforcement, often fighting against ethnic separatist groups (see "Ethnic Groups" below) – was among those responsible for the violence against civilians.

Defense

The Armed Forces of Iran, known as ***Artesh***, is a unified military force consisting of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Air Defense Force, and Paramilitary. *Artesh* and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have a combined strength of 610,000 active-duty troops, 350,000 reserve personnel, and 60,000 paramilitary troops. Upon turning 18, Iranian men must serve 18-21 months.

Military operations focus on maintaining domestic stability and territorial integrity, while exerting Iranian influence abroad. The Armed Forces exerts significant influence over regional allies and proxies, mainly through the IRGC.

IRGC: Comprising about 190,000 active-duty troops, the IRGC Ground Forces has 31 provincial command headquarters, 3 special forces divisions and brigade, and at least 15 maneuver divisions and brigades. The IRGC has some 5,000 active-duty troops in the Quds Force, a special operations force specialized in unconventional warfare, military intelligence, and foreign operations. It also has about 18,000 active-duty troops in the IRGC Naval Forces and some 15,000 active-duty troops in the IRGC Aerospace Force that controls the strategic-missile force.

Army: The Iranian Army consists of 350,000 active-duty troops and is organized into 5 regional headquarters, 10 special forces brigades and regiments, 35 maneuver brigades, divisions, and groups, and 5 combat support artillery groups.

Navy: Comprising some 18,000 active-duty personnel, the Navy includes the Marines, with 2 maneuver brigades, and the Naval Aviation forces.

Air Force: Consisting of about 37,000 active-duty personnel, the Air Force includes 5 fighter, 10 fighter/ground attack, a maritime patrol, an ISR, 6 tanker/transport, a transport helicopter, and 4 training squadrons, as well as search and rescue fleets.

Air Defense Force: The Air Defense Force comprises 15,000 active-duty troops with 25 battalions and squadrons that control military radar and strategic defense points.

Paramilitary: The Iranian Paramilitary consists of about 60,000 active-duty troops and Law Enforcement Forces. Along with the *Basij* Resistance Forces, the Paramilitary assists the military and claims a membership of 12.6 million men and women in wartime.

Iranian Air Force Rank Insignia


General


Lieutenant General


Major General


First Brigadier General


Second Brigadier General


Colonel


Lieutenant Colonel


Major


Captain


First Lieutenant


Second Lieutenant


Third Lieutenant


Officer Cadet


Officer Cadet


Officer Cadet


Officer Cadet


Chief Warrant Officer


Warrant Officer Junior Grade


Sergeant First Class


Sergeant Second Class


Sergeant Third Class


Corporal


Private First Class


Private Second Class


Private

Security Issues

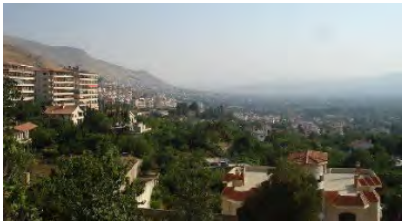
Human Rights: Iranian authorities repress residents throughout the country. Security forces use excessive and sometimes lethal force to contain protests, often resulting in arbitrary detainment, imprisonment, and flogging. Hundreds of journalists, media workers, artists, lawyers, women's rights defenders, anti-death penalty campaigners, and others remain detained for peacefully exercising their human right of freedom of expression.

Abuse and torture in detention centers are widespread, with corporal punishments often amounting to blinding, amputation, crucifixion, and stoning. Prisoners typically suffer unsanitary conditions, inadequate food and drinking water, insufficient beds and bathrooms, and overcrowding.

Forced disappearances are also common. Authorities typically target drug smugglers, members of armed opposition groups, Iranians working secretly for foreign governments, and ethnic minorities on death row, and conceal the location of their bodies, preventing victims' families from receiving closure. Examples of other common human rights violations are forced confessions obtained through torture and denied access to attorneys and fair trials.

The ***Gasht-e Ershad*** (Guidance Patrol, also known as the Morality Police) and *Basij* monitor behavior in public spaces and are authorized to detain individuals deemed to be in violation of dress codes (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender* and p. 1-2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*), which disproportionately affects women. While there is no legal definition for what constitutes proper dress, in practice, women must cover their hair, arms, and legs with loose clothing in public. Since 2017, some Iranians have protested peacefully against the compulsory ***hijab*** (headscarf) and dress code. Many women have since been arrested for not wearing the *hijab* in public. The police also often harass the homosexual community (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*).

Conflict with Israel: Iran considers Israel the "main source of instability and insecurity in the Middle East." Following the 1979 Revolution (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), Iran severed diplomatic and economic ties with Israel, refusing to recognize it as a sovereign state. Iran and Israel describe each other as strategic threats. Ongoing hostility is partially due to Iran's political, financial, and military support of Islamist groups such as Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Hamas, which aim to destroy Israel. In the last few decades, these groups were responsible for numerous deadly attacks originating in the Palestinian Territories of Gaza and the West Bank and attacks against Israeli civilians on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.



Israel and Iran mostly fight in proxy wars – conflicts between countries that provide weapons, finances, and training support to aligned groups with minimal direct fighting – notably in the Syrian Civil War. While Iran continues to support Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime through deploying IRGC forces and assisting pro-government militias, Israel has sent fighter jets to target Iranian military sites in Syria.

Israel often threatens airstrikes against Iran's nuclear facilities and personnel. In 2021, Israel's Defense Minister warned that his country was prepared to strike Iran after it delivered a lethal drone strike on an Israeli-managed oil tanker. Many observers also suspect Israel of supporting ethnic guerrilla groups in Iran.

Israel and Iran have also engaged in cyberattacks. In 2020, Israel retaliated against Iran's failed cyberattack on an Israeli water facility and disrupted operations at the Bandar Abbas port near the Strait of Hormuz (see p. 1 of *Technology and Material*). In late 2021, Israel attacked Iran's fuel distribution system, and Iran attacked a major Israeli medical facility and a popular homosexual dating site. While many Iranians lost fuel access, some Israelis had intimate data stolen and uploaded to social media.

Foreign Relations

Prior to the 1979 Revolution, Iran maintained positive relations with many countries, including the US. Thereafter, various countries and international organizations regularly have condemned Iran for human rights abuses and its nuclear program. Iran's government has supported plots to attack Iranian dissidents in several European countries. Albania, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands have either arrested or expelled Iranian officials implicated in terrorist plots.

Iran is a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (see p. 5 of *Economics and Resources*) and a charter member of the United Nations (UN). Despite belonging to all UN agencies, Iran has participated less since the Revolution.

In 2015, Iran, the US, China, Russia, and other European nations negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to limit Iran's nuclear program (see p. 14-15 of *History and Myth*). The JCPOA sought to reduce Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium, which it could use to make reactor fuel and nuclear weapons, and modify a heavy water facility to prohibit its ability to produce plutonium suitable for a bomb.

In exchange, the UN, US, and European Union lifted sanctions that had crippled Iran's economy for years (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*). However, against advice from European leaders, the US withdrew from the deal in 2018, reinstating sanctions and damaging US-Iran relations).

Relations with US: Following the Revolution and Iran hostage crisis (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), the US and Iran ceased all diplomatic relations in 1980. Today, Pakistan represents Iran in the US, while Switzerland represents the US in Iran.

After the US withdrew from the JCPOA, Supreme Leader Khamenei banned all direct talks with the US, whose sanctions on Iran targeted its oil and financial subsectors. Following the 2019 US designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization, Iran denied US allegations of Iranian attacks on tankers and pipeline infrastructure in the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz.

In early 2020, a US drone strike killed Qasem Soleimani, a prominent commander in the Quds Force. Iran retaliated with missile strikes on US positions in Iraq and supported Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iraq-based radical Shi'a terrorist group, in an attack on the US embassy in Baghdad, Iraq. Continued provocations include drone attacks and ship seizures. In early 2022, the US indirectly participated in discussions to revive the JCPOA agreement with Iran, China, Russia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. As of mid-2024, no nuclear deal has been reached.

Relations with Russia: Although Iran and Russia historically had contentious relations (see p. 6-8 of *History and Myth*), they have increased cooperation in recent years. In 2015, Iran and Russia signed a military agreement to combat terrorism, exchange military personnel for training, and for reciprocal use of port facilities. Both countries support Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and oppose radical Sunni Muslim movements, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS). In 2019, Iran participated in a combined Iranian-Russian-Chinese naval drill in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman. Further, Iran and Russia are both under US-imposed sanctions, which has encouraged a strategic partnership to improve economic ties.

Relations with Iraq: After Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, Iran's relations with Iraq improved substantially. Iran was the first country to help Iraq's government remain in power when ISIS invaded and occupied almost one-

third of Iraq's territory in 2014. Economic relations have also improved, largely due to Iranian exports to Iraqi markets.

However, Iran supports various Iraqi Shi'a paramilitary and terrorist groups, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. These groups expand Iran's influence in Iraq and the wider region through tactics such as intimidating and killing opponents and suppressing anti-Iran protests. They also use Iraq to conduct attacks on neighboring nations or other targets, such as US troops and its embassy in Baghdad.

Relations with Lebanon: Shared regional interests, notably fighting Israel, strengthen relations between Iran and Lebanon, which have had diplomatic ties since 1979. Iran has supported

Hezbollah, a Shi'a Muslim political party and militia based in Lebanon that has held significant power in the Lebanese government since its creation in 1982. Iran provided Hezbollah financial and military support in the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah. However, in 2021, anti-Hezbollah protestors in Beirut demanded an end to Iranian influence in Lebanon, jeopardizing the group's operations there.

Relations with Saudi Arabia: Iran and Saudi Arabia ceased diplomatic relations in 2016, following the Saudi execution of Saudi Shi'a cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, in 2016 in Saudi Arabia and the subsequent attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad by Iranian mobs.

Many observers view Iran as the leading Shi'a-Muslim-majority country and Saudi Arabia the leading Sunni-Muslim-majority country in the Middle East (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), resulting in relations often referred to as a cold war. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia seek dominance in the Middle East, typically fighting proxy wars in regional conflicts, notably in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen, where Iran supports separatist Houthi rebels while Saudi Arabia backs the deposed Yemeni government in the ongoing civil war. In addition, Saudi Arabia

and Iran accuse each other of instigating the spread of terrorism and meddling in other countries' affairs throughout the region.

Ethnic Groups

Some 61% of Iran's population is Persian, followed by Azeri or Azerbaijani (16%), Kurdish (10%), Lors (6%), Turkmen or Turkic Peoples (2%), Arab (2%), Balochi (2%), and others (1%).

The largest minority group in Iran is the Azerbaijani, a Turkic-speaking (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*) Shi'a community, that resides mainly in Tehran and northwestern areas along the border with Azerbaijan. Although they are often prohibited from speaking Azerbaijani in schools and face discrimination, Azerbaijanis are the most integrated minority group in Iranian society, business, and politics. Ayatollah Khamenei is half Azerbaijani.

Kurds are mostly Sunni and mainly reside in northwestern Iran in an area they call "Iranian Kurdistan." Considered one of the world's largest groups of stateless peoples, Kurds also reside in parts of southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and northern and eastern Syria. Unlike many other Iranian minorities, some Kurds harbor separatist tendencies that occasionally result in tensions or violence with the government.

Social Relations

Iranian society is marked by distinctive class divisions. Since the Revolution, a new political-economic elite comprising ***khanedan-e eghtedar*** (wealthy and influential families) has displaced the former elite under the Shah, most of whom have emigrated (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*). The new elite, which mainly consists of businessmen, senior clergy, and landowners has expanded control over Iran's economic, religious, and political spheres, largely through favoritism, marriage, and patronage. Having gained economic influence in recent years, the IRCG operates several companies and monopolizes large-scale infrastructure projects (see p. 3-4 of *Economics and*

Resources). Notably, officials grant IRGC-controlled companies benefits like tax exemption and special licenses to import goods.

The middle class primarily includes business professionals, civil servants, educators, merchants, and military officers. Prior to the Revolution, the middle class was typically secular. After the Revolution, many civil servants were required to complete religious courses that covered topics such as prescribed dress to keep their jobs. As a result, many educated Iranians have emigrated, resulting in a "brain drain" of highly skilled and educated individuals leaving the country. Today, the middle class largely divides between those who support the political elite and those who resent the role of religion in public life.

Shopkeepers, peasants, builders, miners, oil sector employees, and other groups comprise Iran's working class. The government controls unions and considers strikes unpatriotic, which affects workers' rights (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*). The lower class divides into those with regular employment, typically informal workers (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*), and the unemployed.

Although Iran's constitution protects equal rights for all people regardless of ethnic group or tribe, authorities have targeted minority groups disproportionately for arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, disappearances, and physical abuse. Relations between the government and the Kurds are often tense. Since 2016, violent clashes between the separatist Kurdistan Freedom Party and the IRGC have increased. In 2021, Iranian authorities arrested dozens of Kurdish activists, writers, university students, environmentalists, and others.

While Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians have constitutional rights (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), they are often victims of discrimination. Adherents of other faiths, such as the Baha'is, do not have legal rights and historically have been subjected to legal and religious discrimination and persecution.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

The Iranian government estimates that over 99% of residents are Muslim, of which some 90-95% are Twelver Shi'a and 5-10% Sunni. Unofficial estimates suggest several million Sufi practitioners live in Iran. Non-Muslim residents primarily identify as Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Baha'i.

Iran's constitution defines the country as an Islamic Republic with Twelver Shi'ism as the official state religion. Laws and regulations are based on "Islamic criteria" consistent with ***sharia*** (Islamic) law (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Early Religious Landscape

Early Persian religion is shrouded in mystery due to a lack of written sources. Early inhabitants of present-day Iran (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*) worshipped numerous ***daevas*** (humanized deities, some of which are shared with Hinduism), such as ***Mithras*** (god of light), ***Indrus*** (king of the gods), and ***Varuna*** (a sky god). Worship included purification rituals, public chanting, marriage rituals and restrictions, and the consumption of ***soma*** (a sacred, fermented drink). Centuries later, early followers of Zoroastrianism would adopt many of these early practices.

Zoroastrianism

Founded by Persian prophet Zarathustra, or Zoroaster, between 1500-1200 BC, Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion that focuses on the divide between good and evil and uses fire as a form of worship. Zoroaster was a priest, who reformed existing religious practices and wrote the initial ***Gathas*** (hymns) that form the earliest part of the ***Avesta*** (the holy book of Zoroastrianism). Zoroastrians believe Zoroaster was divinely inspired by a vision of ***Ahura Mazda***, the supreme deity, who rules over the universe

and other supernatural entities. Some theologists consider Zoroastrianism the world's oldest monotheistic faith. It shares key tenets with Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), such as a belief in heaven, hell, and judgement day.

By the 3rd century AD, Zoroastrianism had become the state religion of Iran under the Sassanid dynasty (see p. 3-4 of *History and Myth*). During this time, Zoroastrian teachings were first fully compiled into a written *Avesta*. By the 7th century, Zoroastrianism had experienced a major schism and rapid decline due to the arrival of Islam in the region.

Judaism

Jewish communities first settled in Iran in the 6th century BC and grew during the Achaemenid (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*) and Sassanid dynasties. However, the 7th-century arrival of Islam (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*) led to increased persecution and subsequent emigration of many Jews. During the Pahlavi dynasty (see p. 8-10 of *History and Myth*), Jews played an important role in Iranian society as intellectuals and business leaders. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and establishment of Iran as an Islamic theocracy with minimal religious freedom (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) once again prompted many Jews to flee the country.

Christianity

Christianity reached Iran by way of the Levant in the 1st century AD. Christians often faced persecution due to Persian rivalries with the neighboring Christian Byzantine Empire and Kingdom of Armenia. Throughout history, most Christians in Iran have been members of the Armenian and Assyrians churches. Like the Jews, many Christians have emigrated since the Revolution.

Islam

Origins of Islam

Muhammad, who Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims

believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.

Meaning of Islam

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is "a person who submits to God."

Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into two sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (***Caliph***) of the Muslim community (***Ummah***) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

Five Pillars of Islam

There are five basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."
- **Prayer (*Salat* or *Namaz*):** Pray five times a day while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka'aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.
- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate a percentage of one's income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm* or *Ruzeh*):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan (Ramazan in Persian).
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (The *Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia once in a lifetime.

Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one God.

Abraham: All three faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

Scriptures: Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

Jesus: The three religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.

View of Death: Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with

jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

Ramadan

Observed during the 9th month of the Islamic lunar calendar (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*), Ramadan is a month-long period for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life. Muslims typically break their daily fast at sunset with a meal known as ***iftar***. Ramadan includes several holidays:

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This "Night of Power" marks Muhammad's receipt of the first verses of the Qur'an.
- **Eid e-Fitr:** This "Festival of Fast-Breaking" celebrates Ramadan's end and is a national holiday in Iran.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the Hajj ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid e-Ghorban:** This "Festival of Sacrifice" (***Eid al-Adha*** in Arabic) commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God. *Eid e-Ghorban* is a national holiday in Iran.

Arrival of Islam in Iran

Islam first arrived in Iran after Muslim Arab warriors moved into Iranian territory in the 7th century (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). As the Muslim Arabs assimilated with the local population, Islam took hold among many Persians. In 1501, the Safavid dynasty seized power (see p. 5-6 of *History and Myth*) and claimed to rule by divine right through ancestry to the Twelve ***Imams***, the political and spiritual successors to the Prophet Muhammad, and established Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion.

Imami or "Twelvers" in Iran

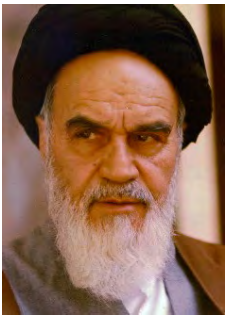
In the 8th century, succession became confused when the *Imam*, Jafar, who first named his eldest son, Ismail, his successor, then changed his mind and named a younger son, Musa. Ismail died before his father and thus never had an opportunity to assert his claim. When Jafar died in 765, the imamate transferred to Musa. Those Shi'a who followed Musa are known to Western scholars as the *Imami* or "Twelver" Shi'a. The name "Twelver" derives from the disappearance of the 12th Imam, Muhammad al Muntazar (the Hidden *Imam*), around 874 AD. He was a child, and after his disappearance, he became known as a messianic figure, the ***Mahdi*** ("Guided One"), who never died but remains to this day hidden from view. The "Twelver" Shi'a believe his return will usher in a golden era. Twelver Shi'ism is the world's largest Shi'a branch and the dominant Shi'a group in Iran. Ismailis, or "Seveners," are the Shi'i community that refused to acknowledge Musa's legitimacy and insisted on Ismail's son's right to rule as *Imam*.

In the 20th century, the Pahlavi dynasty greatly reduced the role of religion in Iranian state affairs (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Secular courts replaced religious ones, and the influence of the ***ulema*** (clerics versed in religious law and theology) declined greatly. However, exiled cleric Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini called for the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and establishment of a fundamentalist Shi'a Islamic republic. Once the 1979 Revolution ousted the Pahlavi ***shah*** (king), Khomeini returned to Iran to found the Islamic Republic (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) and rule as Grand ***Ayatollah*** (a title given to high-ranking clerics).

Religion Today

Today, Islam dominates Iranian society. *Ulema* play a major role in the selection of politicians and evaluate them on their commitment to the Shi'a faith (see p. 4-5 of *Political and Social Relations*). Legal punishments are based on *sharia*. Islamic

beliefs also shape social customs regarding marriage and relationships, cultural aspects like art, music, and literature, and education.



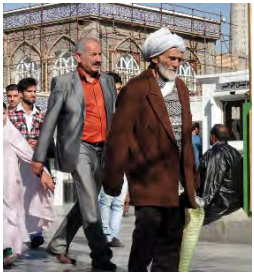
The government restricts religious freedom in Iran. Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews are the only permitted minority religions, yet they still face persecution. Baha'is, unrecognized by the government, face especially harsh discrimination. While the constitution recognizes the rights of non-Twelver Shi'a, Sunnis often face discrimination and harassment. Further, Muslims are not permitted to renounce their faith. Punishments for violators range from prison sentences to beatings or flogging. The law permits death sentences for those found guilty of proselytizing or blasphemy.

Shi'a Islam: Iran is home to over 75 million Shi'a, who live throughout the country. Iran is the only nation in which Twelver Shi'ism is the state religion. Although most Iranians are Twelver Shi'a, a small community of Ismailis lives in northeastern Iran. A few adherents to a secretive syncretic sect known as Ahl-e Haqq live primarily in western and northern Iran.

Shi'a believe the proper successor of the Prophet Muhammad was Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, and that the first three *Caliphs* were illegitimate. Ali was elected the fourth *Caliph* but was later overthrown and assassinated. Following a nearly 30-year dispute, in 661 AD, the governor of Syria named himself *Caliph* and made the caliphate hereditary in his own family, the Umayyads. The Shi'a rejected this action as unjustly taking the caliphate from Ali and his sons. Shi'a attempts to challenge the Umayyad leaders resulted in the death of Ali's son, Husayn. Shi'a now refer to the *Caliph* as the *Imam*, and he is the head of the global Shi'a community.

Sunni Islam: Today, an estimated 8 million Sunnis live in Iran, most of whom are members of the Shafi'i branch, a generally tolerant school of thought that teaches the primacy of the Qur'an over later teachings and stresses the importance of community

consensus. Many Kurds are Shafi'i Muslims (see p. 14-15 of *Political and Social Relations*). Iran is also home to adherents to the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam, which is native to Iraq. The country's largest Sunni communities primarily live in the southeastern and southern provinces of Sistan and Baluchestan and Hormuzgan and in traditionally Kurdish areas in the Northwest. While Iranian leaders have called for ending persecution of Sunnis, many still face hardships like employment discrimination and limitations on the free practice of their faith.



Sufism: An estimated 2 million Iranians living throughout the country follow the Sufi tradition of Islam, characterized by mysticism and ritualistic prayer. Numerous Sufi orders, each with its unique practices, exist in Iran, and all strictly adhere to *sharia*, purification of the self, and emulation of the Prophet Muhammad. Although most Sufi practitioners in Iran are Shi'a, they still face persecution and hostility from the government.

Baha'ism: Baha'is combine aspects of Islam with a belief in the unity of all religions and humanity. Baha'is first emerged in Iran in the mid-19th century. Uniquely, Baha'ism has no clergy or sacraments. Instead, believers worship through prayer. Since officials consider Bahai's apostates punishable by death, Iran's estimated 350,000 adherents tend to practice their faith secretly.

Christianity: Estimates vary widely on the number of Christians in Iran, as many non-Muslims are secretive about their faith. In 2020, official government statistics list 177,000 Christians in Iran, mostly of the Assyrian and Armenian churches. Other surveys place the number of Christians as high as 1 million. Iran's Christians tend to live in cities and northwestern regions.

Judaism: Before the Revolution, some 100-150,000 Jews lived in Iran. Though many have since fled to Israel, Iran has one of the largest Jewish communities in the Middle East and Central Asia. Today, about 12-15,000 Jews live in large cities like Tehran, Esfahan, and Shiraz.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview
The family is the foundation of Iranian society, with members relying on each other for emotional, economic, and social support. Islamic beliefs and customs shape Iranian family life.

Residence

Just prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), only about 45% of the population lived in cities. However, underinvestment in rural areas and millions of internally displaced people, who fled to cities during the Iran-Iraq War (see p. 11-12 of *History and Myth*), have caused significant urbanization. As a result, Iran's capital Tehran and other large cities like Mashhad and Esfahan have grown rapidly. As of 2023, some 77% of residents live in cities.

Urban: Due to overcrowding in cities, many urban Iranians live in huge ***boruj*** (towers) that accommodate hundreds of people. While some upper-class families live in luxurious apartment buildings with underground parking, gyms, swimming pools, and other amenities, many lower-income families live in small apartments with just a few rooms. High property costs prevent many Iranians from buying homes. Many first-time owners lease their property in the suburbs, while living with their parents.

Rural: In rural areas, multiple generations of a family often live together in modest homes. Many houses in central and southern Iran have high mud walls with flat roofs made of mud and straw. Homes in mountain villages often sit on rocky slopes surrounded by fields typically are made of mud and brick with domed roofs. Villages near the Caspian Sea typically consist of two-story wooden houses. Some upper-class city dwellers build second rural homes or vacation villas made of brick or cement in villages near the Caspian Sea.

Family Structure

Family relations are important for Iranian daily life and social organization. Generally, extended relatives are expected to help each other, avoid actions that may bring shame to the family, and value the needs of the family over individual desires. Iranians highly respect their elders and tend to view them as pillars of family honor and integrity. When an elder family member's spouse dies, the widow or widower usually moves in with one of their children. The eldest male in the family is often the undisputed breadwinner and head-of-household.

Polygyny: This term refers to the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In accordance with Islamic law, Muslim men are allowed to have four wives, if they can treat them equally. Though legal in Iran, this practice is uncommon.

Children

Families traditionally had many children but tend to have fewer today. While parents' involvement in their children's lives varies by socioeconomic background, most Iranians pamper their children. Generally, mothers protect their children's reputation, while fathers provide discipline (see p. 1-2 of *Sex and Gender*). Extended family members, particularly grandparents, often assist with childcare. In some rural areas, older children take care of toddlers, and siblings typically develop strong bonds.

Birth: Although traditions vary by ethnic and religious group (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*), many families share traditional celebrations to welcome a newborn. ***Sismooni***, similar to a baby shower, is held a month before the child's birth. Female relatives and friends bring gifts for the baby, and the mother displays what her family has bought for the child.

Circumcision: Most newborn males are circumcised at the hospital immediately following birth. Although not widespread, female circumcision is still prevalent in some regions of Iran (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*).

Marriage

While varying by religion (see p. 6-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*), marriage in Iran tends to be a formal process between two families of similar social standing. Arranged marriage is common, especially in rural areas. Families generally do not force arranged matches, and either marriage prospect typically can reject a proposed partner. In traditional marriages, a cleric drafts a formal contract that the betrothed sign during their wedding ceremony. Marriage contracts often include specified amounts to be paid for the bridewealth and to the woman in the case of divorce. Additional clauses, such as a woman's right to work, have become more common in recent years.

Bridewealth: Upon marriage, a groom or his father traditionally pays ***mehrieh*** or a so-called bridewealth to the bride, which becomes her sole property. A legal requirement for Islamic marriages, the *mehrieh* symbolizes the bride's financial independence and aims to provide security in the event of death or divorce.

Siqeh (temporary marriage) is a legal option under Iranian civil law, though many Iranians do not support the practice. The couple must agree on the marriage duration and compensation that the man pays the woman. *Siqeh* allows for sexual relations between a man and woman, who are not permanently married.

Weddings: Weddings are generally joyous and extravagant events. Most Persian wedding traditions originate from pre-Islamic Zoroastrian traditions (see p. 1-2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), and couples traditionally participate in several pre-wedding ceremonies with friends and family. For example, in the ***jahaz baran*** ceremony, men in the groom's family dress in traditional attire to bring gifts from the bride's family home to the groom. The day before the wedding, during the ***hana bandan*** ceremony, the bride's wedding party convenes to celebrate and decorate her hands and feet with henna (a tattoo made with dye from the henna plant).

The ***sofreh aghd*** is a traditional wedding ceremony centered around an elaborately decorated table covered with symbolic elements such as a mirror to signify light and honey for sweetness. Many Muslim couples place a Qur'an on the table, while more secular couples opt for a book of Persian poetry (see p. 5-6 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Each element of the ceremony includes an associated ritual. In one, the groom holds a mirror to see his wife's reflection, which represents the light and brightness of the married couple's future together.

Divorce

As of 2023, about 14% of marriages end in divorce, compared to about 45% in the US. A woman can divorce her husband if he is imprisoned for at least 5 years, mentally ill, physically abusive, or an addict. Divorce cases typically result in mutual agreement in court, in which the woman receives money from her husband as agreed upon in their marriage contract. Courts typically grant fathers custody of boys over 3-years-old and girls over 7.

Death

Funeral traditions also vary by religious affiliation. According to Islamic tradition, Muslims bury their deceased as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. The body is bathed, dried, and wrapped in a shroud or clean white cloth. Relatives then transport the deceased to a mosque, where male family members and friends typically visit to pay their respects. Female family members usually mourn separately, either in a different mosque hall or at the home of the deceased. Relatives then transport the deceased to a cemetery to be buried.

If a family member or friend cannot attend the funeral, they usually pay condolences on the 3rd or 7th day after the death. To mark the passing of loved ones, women typically wear black for 40 days of mourning.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

The Iranian social system is patriarchal, meaning men hold most power and authority. Legal and institutional discrimination and restrictions limit women's participation in society. In a 2022 report, Iran ranked 143 of 146 countries in gender equality.

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: Women traditionally hold responsibility for childcare, cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the household budget and typically retain those responsibilities, even if they work outside the home. Men rarely assist with domestic chores.

Labor Force: In 2023, only about 14% of Iranian women worked outside the home, lower than the Middle East and North Africa average (16%) and neighboring Turkey (35%), but similar to Iraq (11%). Women mainly work in education, social services, and healthcare. However, Iranian authorities enforce regulations that limit women's workforce participation. Some employers require husbands to provide written consent for their wives to work. About 70% of workers laid off during COVID-19 pandemic were women (see *Sustenance and Health*). Iran has one of the world's widest gendered pay gaps. Women typically make around 41% of what men make for similar work.

Gender and the Law

Although the constitution guarantees equality for all Iranians, women routinely face unequal treatment before the law, which reflects ***sharia*** (Islamic) law principles. The law considers a woman's court testimony worth half that of a man. In addition, Iran's ***Gasht-e Ershad*** (Morality Police, see *Political and Social Relations*) disproportionately targets women, who can receive punishments like 74 lashes or imprisonment for violating the dress code.

The government does not protect women against sexual harassment or discrimination in the workplace. Private- and public-sector employers often specify gender preferences when hiring, limiting women's participation. Although the government has extended parental leave to 9 months for mothers and 2 weeks for fathers, it does not protect employees from termination or demotion due to taking leave.

Personal status laws regulating marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance frequently restrict women's rights (see *Family and Kinship*). A married woman can only obtain a passport or travel outside of Iran with her husband's written permission. While a widow only inherits one-eighth of her husband's estate, a widower inherits his wife's entire estate. Likewise, sons inherit twice as much as daughters, though male heirs must provide financial assistance to their female relatives.

Gender and Politics

Although women gained the right to vote in 1963 and maintained it following the 1979 Revolution (see *History and Myth*), their political participation is low. Today, women hold just 5.6% of parliamentary seats, a significantly lower rate than the US (29%) and neighboring Iraq (29%).

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

GBV is widespread, with at least 66% of married women experiencing domestic violence. Iranian law permits men to discipline wives and female relatives. Although murder is punishable by death under *sharia* (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations),* Iran's penal code exempts fathers and paternal grandfathers, who are considered guardians, from capital punishment for killing a child. As a result, nearly 30% of all murder cases in Iran are honor killings (murders, mostly of a woman or girl by a male family member, who deems the victim's actions to bring shame to the family).

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): Also known as female genital cutting or female circumcision, FGM is any procedure

whereby a woman's external genitalia or genital organs are cut or removed for non-medical reasons. Concentrated primarily among Sunnis in Iran (see *Religion and Spirituality*), FGM is most prevalent in the southern province of Hormozgan, and to a lesser extent in Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan. However, FGM has recently declined in Iran, and especially in Iranian Kurdistan, after neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan prohibited the practice in 2007.

Sex and Procreation

Between 1960-2023, Iran's birthrate dropped from 6.5 births-per-woman to 1.9, less than neighboring Iraq (3.2) and about the same as the US (1.8). While the population boomed following the Iran-Iraq War (see *History and Myth*), limited access to resources and high unemployment accompanied the growth in births (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*). In response, the government offered subsidized contraceptives and vasectomies, which caused the birth rate to decline as family planning preferences changed. However, in recent years, officials have implemented policies like extending maternity leave, providing health insurance to infertile couples, and offering medical services for pregnant women to reverse the declining birthrate. As of 2021, Iran also prohibits the free distribution of contraceptives and restricts access to abortion and sterilization services.

Homosexuality in Iran

Iran's penal code criminalizes same-sex sexual relations with penalties of 100 lashes or death. The ***Basij*** Resistance Force, a volunteer paramilitary group (see *Political and Social Relations*), often harasses, arrests, and detains individuals suspected of being gay. Despite repressive laws against homosexuality, gender reassignment surgery is legal. The government offers loans for the surgery, considering it a "solution" for gay Iranians. Nevertheless, the *Basij* also targets and harasses transgender persons. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Iran. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Persian, also known as Farsi, is the official language of Iran and primary language of government, education, sciences, and media. Of Iran's 65 indigenous languages, most are members of the Indo-European or Altaic language families.

Persian

While around 84% of Iranians (72 million) speak Persian, most can understand at least some Literary Persian, a refined version of the language. Persian is a member of the Indo-Iranian group of the Indo-European language family and closely related to Dari and Tajik, spoken in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, respectively.

Modern Persian traces its roots to Old Persian and Middle Persian. It emerged in the 9th century, when Persians replaced Middle Persian's Pahlavi script with the current Arabic script after Muslim Arab warriors invaded the region (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). As a result, Arabic heavily influenced Modern Persian, which contains many Arabic loanwords and phrases. However, Persian and Arabic are from different language families. Foreign nationals should not confuse them just because they use the same script. Persian is spoken throughout Iran, and although provinces may have dialectic differences, particularly in the East, they are all mutually intelligible.

Other Languages

Some 25% of residents speak Turkic languages. Azerbaijani is the most prevalent (22 million speakers), spoken mostly in northern Iran close to the border with Azerbaijan. Common Indo-European languages include Kurdish (5.5 million), spoken by the Kurdish minority in northern Iran, Gilaki (1.45 million), spoken in Gilan province by the Caspian Sea, Mazandarani (1.3 million),

spoken in north-central Iran, Balochi (1.45 million), spoken in the Southeast, and Luri (3 million) and Bakhtiâri (1.2 million), related languages descended from Middle Persian. While Iran has a small native Arabic-speaking minority, most Iranians speak or understand some Arabic due to its role as the language of Islam, the majority religion in Iran (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

English and French: Educated members of Iranian society learned and spoke English and French, and to a lesser extent German and Russian, prior to the 1979 Revolution (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). Young Iranians are more likely to speak English and older Iranians French, which was popular among many educated Iranians and a second official language in the first half of the 20th century. Though much less common today, these languages, especially English, are taught in some schools (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Some French influence still exists, like the use of ***merci***, meaning "thank you."

Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Iran requires knowledge of Persian, as well as the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intend.

Communication Style

Taarof, the customary back-and-forth of polite gestures and cultural pleasantries that reflects their regard for politeness, etiquette, and tradition, heavily influences Iranians' communication patterns. Accordingly, Iranians are tactful in their communication to demonstrate respect and avoid causing

offense. They tend to communicate indirectly, relying on non-verbal cues and speaking figuratively to make a point. Iranians tend to take their time to convey their meaning in conversation, often using stories, anecdotes, and analogies to deliver their message. This indirectness can confuse people not well-versed in Persian culture.

Communication patterns tend to vary by whether the person is in a public or private space (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*). Public communication is typically more formal, with Iranians typically adhering to governmental guidelines and local Islamic customs to not cause offense.

During conversations, Iranians maintain eye contact to demonstrate respect and sincerity (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*). However, in accordance with Islamic custom (see p. 6-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*), when in public, unrelated men and women are expected to lower their gaze and avoid sustained eye contact with one another. Younger people generally lower their gaze with elders as a sign of respect.

Iranians also show politeness by giving precedence to others in conversation and objecting to compliments to appear humble. Each often insists that the other person speak first. When offered an item, many Iranians initially refuse it before accepting. This principle extends to other interactions, such as shopkeepers initially insisting one doesn't have to pay for an item or a friend that one need not return a borrowed item. In both cases, the insistence is likely just a form of politeness, and they expect that one still pay for or return the item.

Greetings

Proper greetings are an essential part of Persian etiquette, which prescribes that the person of lower status greet the person of higher status first. A handshake is a customary greeting, and to show respect, one nods or bows slightly, while shaking hands. Men do not shake an unrelated woman's hand unless she offers

her hand first. Instead, a man typically greets a woman by placing his hand over his heart and bowing slightly. Adults occasionally shake hands with children as a sign of respect for their parents. Iranians of the same gender often greet or show affection by kissing on the cheek. Iranians also tend to stand when someone enters or leaves a room, particularly if they are older or of higher status.

Most Iranians use the Arabic greeting ***Salaam*** ("peace") to say hello. Many Iranians consider it polite to follow an initial greeting by asking about a person's health and the wellbeing of their family. As someone leaves, a common phrase is ***khoda hafez*** ("may God protect you").

Names

Iranian names consist of a first (given) and last (surname) name. Middle names are uncommon. Instead, some Iranians have two first names. Children take their father's last name, though women are not required to take their husband's surname. They may add it after their own last name with a hyphen. First names often have religious origins or are based on inspiring characters from Old Persian literature (see p. 5-6 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

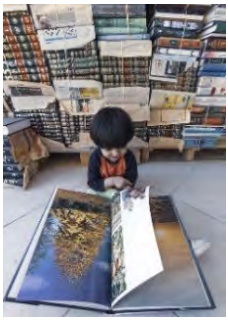
Some names have a literal meaning, such as Behrooz (boy's name), meaning "better day," or Bahar (girl's name), "season of spring." Modern Iranian last names often reflect a family's city or region. For example, someone with the last name "Tehrani" is likely from Tehran or has family roots there. Other last names indicate a parent's name. For example, "Hassanzedan" means "son of Hassan".

Forms of Address

When greeting someone formally, Iranians use titles like ***agha*** (Mr.) and ***khanoom*** (Mrs./Ms.) with last name as a form of politeness. To show greater familiarity, while still demonstrating respect, many Iranians use *agha* or *khanoom* followed by first name. Informally, friends and relatives typically use only first names. ***Jan*** and ***joon*** (dear) are common terms of endearment. For example, a man named Milad may be called Milad *jan*.

Conversational Topics

Polite conversational topics typically include small talk about a person's hometown, work, and family. Foreign nationals should be cautious about discussing political or religious beliefs and refrain from asking about Iranians' personal lives, and it is best to avoid asking about personal relationships, even among friends. Likewise, when discussing current affairs, foreign nationals should be cautious not to give the impression that the US or Western nations are superior to Iran or display a negative conception of the region, as many Iranians find it offensive. In general, it takes time to gain the trust of Iranians.



Gestures

In formal settings, Iranians pass and receive objects with both hands. Tilting the head up quickly indicates "yes" and down swiftly means "no." To beckon, Iranians wave all fingers with the palm facing down. They tend not to smile much in public, and smiling at a stranger while passing by may signify a provocation. It is impolite to point with the index finger during conversation. The thumbs up gesture is often considered rude, particularly for older Iranians. Displaying the soles of one's shoes or feet or putting one's feet up on a chair or table also are considered rude, as is slouching or stretching one's legs in front of an elder.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

Persian Pronunciation and Transliteration

Transliteration is the process of spelling out Persian words using the Roman (Latin) alphabet. The table below shows sounds or letters that have no English equivalent or that vary from some English pronunciations. In practice, Iranians sometimes place the Romanized versions of Persian words or English translations on street signs next to or below the Persian script, particularly in large cities like Tehran, Mashhad, and Esfahan.

Persian Letter	Transliteration and Description	Example
چ	ch	**ch**air
ژ	zh / je	de **j**ure
خ	kh; strong “h”	lo**ch** (as pronounced in Scotland)
ش	sh	**sh**adow
ح	ḥ or h; whispered “h”	**h**oot
ص	ṣ or s	**s**aw
غ / ق	gh; like the guttural French “r”	Par**i**s (as pronounced by a French person)
ع	’ (a glottal stop)	the pause in the middle of “uh-oh”
ک	k	**K**urdish

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Persian (Romanized)
Hello	Salaam
Goodbye	Khoda hafez
Yes	Bale / Areh
No	Na
Please	Lotfan
Thank you / Thanks	Moteshakkeram / Merci
Excuse me	Bebaksheed
Sorry	Mutasefam / Mazarat mikham
How are you? (formal)	Hale shoma chetor hast?
How are you? (informal)	Hale shoma chetori
Fine, thank you. And you? (formal)	Khoobam, kheily mamnoon. Shoma chetori?
Fine, thanks. And you? (informal)	Khoobam, merci. To chetori?
What's your name?	Esme shoma cheest?
My name is…	Esme man… hast. Man… hastam.
Can you speak English?	Shoma engleesee sohbat mikoni?
I'd like a / the … please.	Lotfan… bedi / Khahesh mikonam… bedi
I don't understand	Nemifahmam
Where's the…?	…kojaast?
Restroom	Toalet / Dastshui
How do I get there?	Chetori beresam be oonja?
Turn left / right	Chap bepeech / Rast bepeech
Straight ahead	Mostagheem / Jelo
Today	Emrooz
Tomorrow	Farda
Yesterday	Dirooz
Morning	Sobh
Afternoon	Baad az zohr
Evening	Aasr
Help!	Komak!
I am lost	Gom hodam
What time is it?	Sa'at chande?
When?	Che vaght? / Kay?
Who?	Cheh kassi? / Key?
Where?	Koja?
Why?	Cheraa?
Car	Maasheen
Bus	Ootoobus

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 89%
- Male: 93%
- Female: 85

Early Education

Before the arrival of standardized formal education, regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations. During the Achaemenid era that began in the 6th century BC (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*), residents educated their youth largely at home, with schools affiliated to royal courts open only to the children of the elite. Greek invasions and the resultant Seleucid dynasty (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*) introduced Hellenic philosophy to the region, a subject which Persian educational institutions incorporated into their curricula.

Around the 3rd century AD, the Sassanids (see p. 3-4 of *History and Myth*) expanded their focus on education and began training high-ranking scholars and clerics. The Sassanids founded several large libraries that served as centers of education. The most famous, the Gondeshapur Academy in western Iran, became a regional center of learning, benefitting from its relative proximity to and exchange with Western and South Asian scholars. Gondeshapur developed a curriculum that covered medicine, Greek and South Asian philosophy, and Zoroastrian theology (see p. 1-2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Islamic Education

After the 750 establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in present-day Baghdad, Iraq (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*), scholars in Iran benefitted from a cultural blossoming in the region. While

Muslim leaders sidelined Zoroastrian teaching, Iranian libraries became a center for translating Islamic, academic, and literary texts in Persian, Arabic, and South Asian languages.

After the 1055 Seljuk invasions that promoted the spread of a puritanical form of Sunni Islam (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*), mosques began to replace Persian academies and libraries as the most important centers of learning. Enrollment in ***madrasas*** (religious schools) became the principal means of education in medieval Iran. *Madrasas* grew in importance under the Safavids, who entrusted the ***ulema*** (clerics versed in religious law and theology) with spreading knowledge of their branch of Shi'a Islam (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Safavid rulers, particularly ***Shah*** (King) Abbas, invested heavily in expanding the *madrasas* in the late 16th century (see p. 5-6 of *History and Myth*).

Western Education

Under the 19th-century rule of Qajar shahs (see p. 6-7 of *History and Myth*), an increased European presence in Iran introduced more Western forms of education to the country. Urban elites founded schools, where instruction was largely in English and French. However, the *ulema,* who had held a monopoly over education, showed tremendous resistance to the establishment of schools for Christian and Jewish students.

Nevertheless in 1851, Qajar officials established the first Western post-secondary center of learning with the founding of Dur ul-Funun, a military polytechnic school staffed by European professors. However, this and other academies founded later were not degree-granting institutions, forcing most Iranian elite to study abroad, often in France, to attain a university education.

Reforms Under the Pahlavi Dynasty and Islamic Revolution

From 1921-79, the governments of Reza Shah and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (see p. 8-10 of *History and Myth*) further overhauled the educational system in line with Western models. In 1934, Reza Shah founded the University of Tehran.

During this period, social reforms allowed more women, who previously were excluded from attending most schools, to access education. However, some of the educational reforms did not reach rural areas, where many Iranians could not read or write. To reverse this trend, the government created a national literacy campaign during the White Revolution in the 1960s (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

Soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), the government reformed the educational system and incorporated religious instruction in curricula to mirror its new Islamic constitution (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*). The government mandated gender segregation in primary and secondary schools and dismissed many teachers and university professors having suspected Western or pro-Shah sentiments. The mass exodus of Iran's educated elite and the strain that the Iran-Iraq War brought to the country (see p. 11-12 of *History and Myth*) negatively impacted post-secondary education nationwide.

Modern Education System

According to Iran's constitution, education is free and compulsory for all citizens, with a mandated minimum of 8 years of schooling starting at age 6. Generally, state-run public schools dominate the educational system, though some private and international schools, concentrated in urban areas, cater to more affluent Iranians. In 2020, about 13% of Iranian students were enrolled at private, fee-based institutions.

As of 2022, Iran's literacy rate (89%) is slightly higher than the average for Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (80%), and significantly higher than the most recently recorded rates in neighboring Afghanistan (37% in 2021) and Pakistan (58% in 2019), but far lower than adjacent Turkey (97%).

The structure of Iran's educational system is modeled after the French system, which relies on rote learning. Since the Islamic

Revolution, the Ministry of Education has enacted significant changes to the curriculum, like implementing gender segregation and compulsory lessons that highlight civic responsibilities to the government and promote Islam (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Persian (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*) is the constitutionally mandated language of instruction, though schools serving ethnic minorities (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*) are entitled to teach their respective languages as well.

As of 2022, Iran spends some 2.7% of its GDP on education, lower than the US (5.4%) and the 2020 MENA average (3.8%). A 2011 reform has sought to improve educational outcomes and overall quality in the country's public schools, particularly in cities, where underfunding and high population density force many schools to operate two or three shifts per day. The reform produced a new curriculum that has reduced emphasis on rote learning and standardized exams.

Pre-Primary: Children between the ages of 4-5 may attend free public or fee-based private kindergartens. While the government finances many pre-primary schools, budgetary issues have caused demand for spots at these institutions to exceed supply, and attendance at private nursery schools are often too expensive for many Iranians. In 2020, some 72% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary school.

Basic Education: Basic education comprises primary studies (grades 1-5) and begins at age 6. Instruction focuses on Persian, religion, math, science, social studies, and a second language if the student belongs to an ethnic minority. English instruction is available mostly in private schools. Students receive grades on a scale from 1-20 and must score at least a 10 in every subject to continue to the next grade. In 2017, some 99% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary school.

Secondary Education: This level divides into "Guidance Cycle" (grades 6-8) and "Secondary Cycle" (grades 9-11). While

Guidance Cycle education is compulsory and a general continuation of primary studies, students have the option to enroll in a specialized Secondary Cycle. Academic programs at this level are available in four categories: math, science, humanities, and Islamic studies. Likewise, students have the option to attend a ***honarstân*** (technical school) that teaches various trades, music, and the arts.

When students complete 11th grade, they receive a high school diploma and have the option to enroll in a school for a supplementary year to prepare for the fiercely competitive ***konkour***, Iran's standardized university entrance exams. As of 2017, over 81% of students of appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education.

Post-Secondary Education: The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) oversees all post-secondary education in Iran and sets standardized curricula for all universities. While the uniformity in curricula is meant to reduce geographic disparity in educational outcomes, the quality of education still varies significantly between urban and rural areas. Entrance to free public universities is based entirely on performance on the *konkour,* leading to intense competition for open spots at these institutions. Primary examples include the highly ranked University of Tehran and Tehran University of Medical Sciences.

Likewise, the MoHE sets the curricula at private universities. Because the tuition and fees are too expensive for many Iranians, competition for spots at fee-based private colleges is typically less intense. The private Open Islamic University is one of the world's largest universities, with over a million students enrolled across several campuses in Iran.

Vocational and trade schools offer 2-year associates degrees, while 4-year programs at universities award a ***license*** (bachelor's degree) that permits students to pursue a ***fogh license*** (master's degree) or ***doctora*** (PhD).

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Iranians consider interpersonal connections and respect for hierarchy as key to conducting business. In general, public displays of affection are inappropriate, though social touching among friends and family of the same gender is common.

Time and Work

Iran's workweek runs Saturday-Wednesday, and most businesses also open on Thursday mornings. While normal business hours are 9am-6pm, some businesses and shops follow an 8am-5pm schedule with an hour-long break in the afternoon. Banks and government offices open from 8am-2pm during the week, and if open on Thursdays, they close at noon. Post offices open from 7:30am-3pm, while supermarkets and other food stores commonly open from 9am-8pm. Notably, many shops and businesses have shorter hours during the holy month of Ramadan (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and close during the afternoon in the hot summer months before reopening for the cooler evening hours.

Working Conditions: Iranian labor laws establish an 8-hour workday and 5.5-day workweek. Laws also guarantee a national minimum wage, overtime pay, paid vacation, time to participate in the ***Hajj*** pilgrimage (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), and paid parental leave (see p. 2 of *Sex and Gender*). Despite these and other benefits and protections, the combination of lax enforcement and lack of effective labor unions to advocate for protections often results in unsafe working conditions. Around 31% of Iranians are engaged in informal employment (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*), whereby labor codes such as the minimum wage and other workplace standards are inapplicable.

Time Zone: Iran adheres to Iran Standard Time (IRST), which is 3.5 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 8.5

hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Iran observes Iran Daylight Time (IRDT) from the end of March-September when Iran is 4.5 hours ahead of GMT.

Calendars: Iran uses three calendars for recording time. While Iranians use the Gregorian (Western) calendar for interactions with foreign nationals and in some history books, they mark most dates with the Persian solar calendar. The Persian calendar is based on an ancient Zoroastrian timekeeping system (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and begins recording dates from the spring equinox of the ***Hejira*** (the year the Prophet Muhammad fled Mecca for Medina, in 622 AD). The calendar contains 12 months and lasts 365 days, beginning when the spring equinox is observed in Tehran, meaning that the start of the New Year is always in March but may vary slightly from year-to-year as compared to the Gregorian calendar. Iranians mark the New Year with the spring festival of ***Nowruz*** (Persian New Year – see p. 2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Iranians also use the ***Hijri*** (Islamic) calendar to track Muslim holidays. Since it is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western calendar. The Islamic calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

Date Notation: Iranians use the Persian calendar for daily date notation and official documents. They typically write the day first, followed by the month and year. For example, July 4, 2022, in the US is 13 ***Tir*** 1401 in Iran.

Time and Business: While Iranians tend to have a relaxed approach to time, they value punctuality in most workplaces, and business meetings typically begin and end on time. Workplaces tend to be hierarchical, and subordinate staff's inability to act without management's approval can prolong negotiations and decision-making.

National Holidays

- February 11: Islamic Revolution Day
- March 20: Nationalization of Petroleum Day
- March 20-24 (date varies by year): *Nowruz*
- April 1: Islamic Republic Day
- April 2: ***Sizdah be Dar*** (Nature Day)
- June 4: Death of Ayatollah Khomeini
- June 5: Uprising of 15 ***Khordad*** (honoring the protests of the June 1963 arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*)

Variable dates according to the lunar *Hijri* calendar:

- ***Tasua***: Eve of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali
- ***Ashura***: Martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali
- ***Chehelom***: 40 days after *Ashura*
- Death of the Prophet Muhammad
- Martyrdom of ***Imam*** (the political and spiritual successor to the Prophet Muhammad) Reza
- ***Mawlid al-Nabi***: Birth of Prophet Muhammad
- Martyrdom of Fatima
- Birth of *Imam* Ali
- ***Sab-e Miraj***: Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad
- Birthday of *Imam* Mahdi
- Martyrdom of *Imam* Ali
- ***Eid e-Fitr***: End of Ramadan
- Martyrdom of *Imam* Jafar Sadegh
- ***Eid e-Ghorban***: Festival of Sacrifice
- ***Qadir-e Khom***: Appointment of *Imam* Ali as the Prophet Muhammad's successor

Public and Personal Space

The ways in which Iranians occupy space depends on various factors, particularly the difference between ***baaten*** (private) and ***zaaher*** (visible or public) spaces, and the nature of the relationship. Iranians often monitor personal space, particularly between genders, more closely in *zaaher* spaces, where police

often enforce adherence to prescribed morals (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). Although the government encourages gender segregation in public, it does not always strictly enforce the practice. Many schools provide segregated instruction (see p. 4 in *Learning and Knowledge*), and mosques usually designate separate areas for men and women to pray. Some offices and means of public transportation also segregate by gender (see p. 1 of *Technology and Material*). Friends and family generally observe less personal space than with strangers or acquaintances and when in the privacy of their homes.

Touch: Unrelated Iranians of the opposite gender tend to refrain from touching, even during greetings (see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*). Close friends and relatives often touch while interacting, and many friends of the same gender hold hands in public, demonstrating the closeness of their relationship.

Eye Contact: Iranians typically engage in direct eye contact during greetings to convey interest and respect. During conversation, moderate eye contact signals attentive engagement. Nevertheless, many Iranians avoid sustained eye contact with elders and members of the opposite gender (see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*).

Photographs

Foreign nationals should acquire an Iranian's permission before taking his photo. Government and military installations typically discourage or prohibit photography.

Driving

Some Iranians drive aggressively, ignoring traffic laws and pedestrians' right-of-way. Road conditions in urban areas tend to be decent. Conditions are typically poor in rural areas, where the combination of badly maintained roads and lack of lighting makes driving after dark dangerous. In 2020, Iran recorded 22.2 traffic fatalities per 100,000 people, higher than the US rate (11.1). Like Americans, Iranians drive on the right side of the road.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

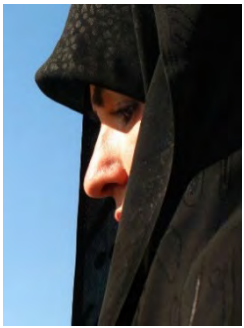
Iran's clothing, sport, music, and arts reflect its unique history, religion, ethnic diversity, and social and political movements.

Dress and Appearance

Standards of dress are conservative. Both male and female visitors should also dress conservatively, avoiding shorts, mini-skirts, and sleeveless tops, except when visiting private beaches or pools. Additionally, foreign national women must wear a ***hijab*** (headscarf) that covers their hair and neck in public.

Before the 1979 Revolution (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), the ***Shah*** (King, see p. 2 of *History and Myth*) forbade women from wearing the *hijab*, instead mandating they wear Western-style attire. Wearing the *hijab* was a symbol of opposition to the Shah during the Revolution, an act that the government began to enforce in 1981. Today, unveiled women in public can be subject to lashes as punishment.

Women: They must conceal their hair, neck, and all bodily contours after puberty. Common dress includes a ***roo-poosh*** (knee-length coat) worn over a long dress or pants, and a *hijab*.



Women from more conservative communities or regions typically wear a ***chador*** (black robe), which all women must wear to holy sites, such as mosques or shrines. Some women rebel against the dress code by wearing their *hijab* loosely on the back of their heads, exposing their hair.

Men: They typically wear short- or long-sleeved shirts and pants. Shorts and capri pants are only acceptable at the beach. Clergy tend to dress conservatively, usually in a white shirt, ***ghaba*** (cloak), and turban. While most turbans are white, ***syed*** (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad–see p. 2-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) wear black ones.

Traditional: This attire tends to be modest and varies by region and ethnic group (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*). For example, in the southeastern Sistan and Baluchestan province, women wear wide-legged trousers with knee-length dresses and long shawls that typically cover their heads and shoulders, while men wear long pants, loose shirts, and turbans. In the northern region of Gilan, Gilak women traditionally dress in long, pleated shirts, embroidered black vests, and floor-length skirts with horizontal stripes. Gilak men typically wear black pants with a white shirt, vest, and colorful socks or waistband.

Recreation and Leisure

Iranians tend to spend their leisure time with friends and family. Popular pastimes include dining, shopping, and socializing at malls and ***bazaars*** (traditional open-air markets). Regional and, for affluent Iranians, international travel is also popular. Regular excursions to gardens and religious sites are common. Although men often watch sporting events in massive stadiums, women are banned from attending. Likewise, men frequently visit ***chaykhanehs*** (tea houses), where they smoke flavored tobacco from ***qalyan*** (water pipes).

Holidays and Festivals: Iranians celebrate a wide array of religious holidays that reflect the country's Shi'a Muslim and other religious traditions (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*). While most Iranian Muslims celebrate ***Eid e-Ghorban***, ***Eid e-Fitr***, and ***Ashura*** (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Sunnis do not celebrate the latter holiday. For at least 3,000 years, Iranians have celebrated the spring equinox as the beginning of ***Nowruz*** (Persian New Year), the most important holiday in Persian culture. Celebrations include jumping over bonfires, eating, visiting friends and family, and setting the ***Haft-sin*** (a decorative table with symbolic elements of spring and renewal). While some Iranians place the Qur'an on the table, many instead use Ferdowsi's ***Shahnameh*** (Book of Kings) or Hafez's book of poetry (see "Literature" below.

Sports and Games

Iranians participate in various sports, such as ***koshti*** (wrestling), weightlifting, skiing, volleyball, and martial arts. Some Iranians play ***chovgan,*** a precursor to polo that originated in ancient Persia. Widely considered an aristocratic game, *chovgan* is less popular today. The ***zurkhaneh*** ("strength and power house") is a traditional place for ***varzesh-e bastani*** ("heroic sport") training, which combines *koshti,* religious hymns, martial arts, and music.

In the Olympics, Iranians have medaled primarily in wrestling, weightlifting, and to a lesser extent karate and taekwondo. In the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics, Kimia Alizadeh, the first and only Iranian female Olympian medalist, won bronze in taekwondo.

Soccer: Known as "football" in the region, soccer is Iran's most popular sport and pastime, and many Iranian children learn to play at a young age. Iran's national team, nicknamed the Persian Leopards, has won three Asian Cup championships. As of 2021, Iran has qualified for five FIFA World Cups but never made it past the initial group stage.

In 2019, FIFA condemned Iran's ban on women from entering stadiums. Although the government lifted the restriction on women entering the Azadi stadium in Tehran to watch the World Cup qualifier match between Iran and Cambodia, tickets were limited to just 4,600 women, even though the stadium has a capacity of over 78,000 people.

Games: Iranians play many games such as ***takhteh nard*** (backgammon), which involves two players attempting to clear their markers from the board. Chess is also a popular pastime.

Music

The ***Radif*** ("order") is a collection of over 250 short musical pieces influenced by poetry and passed from master to disciple through oral instruction. Comprising the repertoire of classical Persian music,

the *Radif* is organized into 12 ***dastgah*** (sequences) with numerous ***goushehs*** (melodies) and 5 ***avazes*** (unmetered vocal sections).

Prominent traditional instruments include the ***setar*** (long-necked stringed instrument like a mandolin), ***tar*** (a stringed instrument similar to a guitar), ***kamanca*** (small round fiddle supported on a spike), ***santur*** (trapezoid-shaped dulcimer), ***ney*** (flute), and ***tombak*** or ***zarb*** (types of drums).

After the Revolution, the government banned pop music and women singing in public. Nevertheless, Faegheh Atashin, known as pop star Googoosh, remained one of Iran's most popular musicians. After leaving Iran in 2000, she continued recording new songs and touring internationally. Other famous musicians are Mohammad Reza Shajarian, known for traditional music and two Grammy nominations; ***Chaartaar*** ("Four Strings"), a four-member band that fuses electronic music with traditional vocals; and Arash, an Azerbaijani Persian pop singer, who was born in Tehran but moved to Sweden at 10 years old.

Although the government banned Western music from radio and TV stations in 2005 (see p. 3 of *Technology and Material*), many Iranians listen to an array of foreign and Iranian music styles like pop, rock, folk, classical, rap, heavy metal, and electronic.

Dance

Before the Revolution, the Iranian National Ballet Company was one of the best and most respected ballet companies in the region, often featuring ballerinas from the US and Europe. Since 1979, dancing has become a punishable offence when authorities deem it "indecent." Nevertheless, many Iranians pay bribes or keep dancing hidden in private life to avoid reprimand.

Traditional dances, often grouped into line, solo, war or combat, and ritual or spiritual categories, vary by region and ethnic group

(see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*). For example, ***baba karam***, a chain dance dating to the Qajar dynasty (see p. 6-7 of *History and Myth*), imitates the behaviors of Iranian working-class men. Today, many Iranians consider *baba karam* the Persian style of modern hip-hop dance.

Cinema and Theater

Although strict censorship forces adherence to Iran's prescribed social and religious codes, Iranian films frequently gain international acclaim. Many films are social dramas that explore minimalist storylines, often with rich, political subtexts.

Oscar-winning director Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*, a divorce story exploring how policies and religious principles affect both private and public life, won the Academy Award for best foreign-language film in 2012. His film *The Salesman*, a story about a married couple, won the same award in 2017. Filmmaker women in Iran often examine social and economic issues from a woman's perspective. Director Samira Makhmalbaf and filmmaker Tahmineh Milani are notable for their work on family dynamics, love, favoritism, and other social practices in Iran.

Unlike most film, ***tazieh*** (condolence theater) is not censored. Inspired by events surrounding the death of Hussein (the Prophet Muhammad's grandson), *tazieh* is a play in which audience members often cry and mourn during the production, typically performed during *Ashura* in Qom, Esfahan, and various other cities.

Literature

Iran has a long and rich history of literature. Today, traditional Persian poetry still influences Iranian culture and society, and Iranians commonly reference poetic verses.

One of the world's most important poetry books is *Shahnameh*, recorded by Persian poet Ferdowsi between 977-1010. As a collection of rhythmically written stories and legends, some of which are 7,000 years old, *Shahnameh* is one of the world's longest epic poems. Other prominent poets include Hafez, who specialized in ***ghazal*** (a genre of lyrical poems), Saadi Shirazi, known for his social and moral thought, and Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, whose allegorical lyric poetry was influenced by Sufi mysticism (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). These authors' works from the 13th and 14th centuries continue to hold national importance, appearing in songs, art, and calligraphy.

Although modern Iranian literature comprises all genres, state censorship limits its content. Today, many authors write about human rights and the nuances of public vs. private life (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*). In 2021, several authors were arrested and are serving prison sentences for violating state censorship laws. As a result, many Iranian authors have fled or write from abroad. After leaving Iran for the US, Shahriar Mandanipour published *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* and won the New Yorker Best Book of the Year award in 2009. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a graphic novel series about Satrapi's youth in Iran and Vienna during the Revolution, has also won international acclaim.

Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Traditional crafts, such as calligraphy, pottery, woven carpets, and ***minakari*** (enameling, the art of painting and ornamenting metals with vibrant colors) often include geometric motifs and nature themes, such as foliage and animals. Renowned for its rich colors and variety of patterns, Persian carpet weaving originated over 2,500 years ago. Although difficult to trace their origins, Persian miniature paintings became popular during Mongol rule over Persia in 13th-16th centuries (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*). Graphics typically depict scenes of royal hunts, battles, and stories from mythology and poetry.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Meals are often important social events, with family and friends lingering for conversation and companionship. Traditional Iranian cuisine reflects the country's geographic diversity and long history of contact with Arab, Central Asian, and South Asian cultures.

Dining Customs

Most Iranians eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. Traditionally, breakfasts are light, and the largest meal is lunch, served at midday or in the early afternoon. Diners typically begin their meals with ***sabzi*** (herbs) and starters such as olives and cheese or a small soup, meant to prepare them for the larger courses to follow. When invited to an Iranian home, guests usually arrive a few minutes late and bring sweets, flowers, or pastries to thank the host for their hospitality.

Iranians classify food into "hot" and "cold" categories and prefer meals to have a balance of both to promote good health and wellbeing. Iranians' classification of food into each category has less to do with temperature than each ingredient's perceived impact on the diner's ***mizaj*** (temperament). Generally, Iranians consider meats, fruits, herbs, and nuts hot, while vegetables, fish, rice, and yogurt are cold. Iranians may select the ingredients they use based on this classification to complement the temperament of those dining or the day's temperature.

Diet

While varying by region, Iranian food relies heavily on meats and starches. ***Nan*** (bread) is an important food component, with four types served regularly: ***lavash*** (a basic thin bread often used for

scooping food from the main dish), ***taftoon*** (a crisp, round bread), *barbari*, and the most popular, ***sangak*** (a long, thick bread cooked over hot stones). Many meals also incorporate ***chelo*** (rice) as a central component, either steamed, boiled, or in side dishes like ***polo*** (rice with barberries, nuts, and spices) or ***tahdig*** (crispy rice sometimes served with potatoes).

Besides starches, meals typically incorporate vegetables, fruits, and animal protein like beef, chicken, fish, or most frequently, lamb. Iranians near the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea often serve ***mahi*** (fish), most commonly white fish varieties. Dishes tend to rely heavily on local produce, spices, and nuts for their distinctive taste. Common flavorings include saffron, cardamom, pomegranates, apples, apricots, plums, walnuts, ***bademjan*** (eggplant), and ***mast*** (yogurt).

Meals and Popular Dishes

For breakfast, Iranians often eat *lavash* with ***lighvan*** (a feta-like cheese) and jam. Carrot jam is an especially popular choice. For larger breakfasts, some Iranians visit restaurants that specialize in ***kalleh pacheh*** (a spiced soup with boiled meat from sheep heads and legs). In the mornings, many Iranians traditionally sip strong black tea from a saucer through a lump of sugar held between their teeth, a practice popular throughout the day but particularly in the morning.

The mid-day meal frequently features *nan* and *chelo* with ***kebab*** (meat cooked over coals and often topped with sumac and fresh onion). Common *kebab* dishes are ***bakhtiyari*** (lamb chops and chicken), ***kubide*** (minced lamb with breadcrumbs and onions), and ***juje*** (chicken marinated in sumac). Other popular meals are ***ghorme sabzi*** (a stewed mix of diced meat, herbs, beans, and vegetables), ***fesenjan*** (chicken cooked with crushed toasted walnuts and pomegranate syrup), and ***gheimeh*** (a lamb or beef stew served with split peas and tomato).

Dinner is often served around 7pm and usually features dishes similar to lunch, though often lighter and with smaller portions. Other popular dishes are ***dizi*** and ***khoresht*** stews, which feature meats boiled with vegetables. Dessert is commonly fresh fruit, though sweets such as ***kolompe*** (a cookie filled with dates) or ***sohan*** (a ginger and pistachio toffee brittle) are also popular. In the summer months, frozen desserts such as ***faloodeh*** (vermicelli noodles soaked in rosewater and topped with lime or sour cherry juice) and ***bastani akbar mashti*** (saffron and vanilla ice cream with pistachio and rosewater often served between two wafers) are also popular.

Beverages

Iran prohibits Muslims (see p. 6-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*) from buying or consuming alcoholic beverages, though liquor is sometimes available when sold by religious minorities or on the black market (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*). Apart from tea, Iranians consume a variety of non-alcoholic drinks, notably ***doogh*** (a fermented, fizzy yogurt served chilled) and ***sharbat*** (a drink prepared from fruit or herb syrups and commonly flavored with saffron, rose, peppermint, or lime).

Eating Out

Restaurants in large urban centers such as Tehran and Shiraz range from upscale establishments specializing in high-end Iranian and international cuisine to inexpensive food stalls or cafeterias. Many ***chaykhanehs*** (teahouses) commonly serve *dizi* or *khoresht*, while food stalls often specialize in *kebab,* ***felafel*** (fried balls of ground chickpeas, common in Iran's southwest), ***samosas*** (fried turnovers typically flavored with onion), or ***kuku*** (omelets containing herbs,

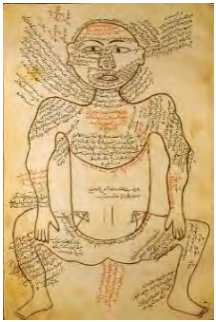
eggplant, or potatoes, fried on both sides to form a thick disc). Western-style fast food restaurants are also common, primarily in cities. Although tipping is not customary in many eateries, some restaurants have a box on the check for the diner to leave an optional tip of around 10%.

Health Overview

While the overall health of Iranians has improved in recent decades, they continue to face high rates of non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases and other serious health challenges. Between 1990-2023, life expectancy at birth increased from about 64 to 75 years, a figure higher than the average of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries (74) but lower than the US (81). Between 1990-2023, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from about 44 deaths per 1,000 live births to 15, lower than the MENA average (18) but twice the US rate (5).

Traditional Medicine

This healthcare type consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Today, traditional medicine in Iran focuses primarily on herbal remedies and other non-surgical treatments to cure both physical and mental illness. The herbal medicines and food are commonly used to cure illnesses attributed to an imbalanced *mizaj*.



Healthcare System

While Iran's constitution (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) grants every citizen the right to receive basic medical care, many Iranians lack access to quality treatment. The government offers healthcare through a network of public hospitals in cities and ***behvarz*** (health houses – small clinics that specialize in preventative care) in rural areas. The Ministry of Health and Medical Education supervises these centers through medical universities in each province (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Large hospitals provide basic preventative and

curative services and long-term care associated with major illnesses like cancer and respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Notably, Iran is the world's only country with a legalized organ trade. Citizens can legally sell their kidneys in exchange for cash, loans, or better healthcare.

Historically, Iran's spending on its healthcare system has been higher than other countries in the region. In 2021, healthcare spending was 5.8% of GDP, lower than the MENA average (5.8%) and about three times lower than the US rate (17%). Most Iranians are insured under the government-run Social Security Organization (SSO), which is funded through the government budget, employer contributions, and salary deductions. Care through the SSO provides basic medical services for free or at reduced cost in the country's public hospitals. Separate government-funded health insurance or non-governmental organizations typically cover government employees, members of the armed forces, and informal-sector workers (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*)).

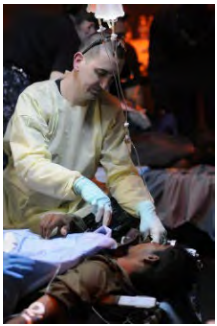
Iran's private healthcare system, primarily based in large cities, typically provides a higher level of care and features shorter patient wait times compared to public facilities. However, high upfront and out-of-pocket costs mean private services are only accessible to middle- and upper-income Iranians. The variance between the private and public systems has resulted in notable differences in health outcomes across socio-economic groups, particularly between rural and urban Iranians. While efforts to increase healthcare coverage and quality have had relative success over the past decades, wide disparities remain.

Health Challenges

The leading causes of death are chronic and non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases, which accounted for about 81.3% of deaths in 2019. Of these, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases,

diabetes, and cancer are the most common. Preventable "external causes," such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 10.6% of deaths, higher than the US rate (7%). Roadside accidents (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*) historically have been a leading cause of death in Iran and were the third most common cause in 2019.

Communicable diseases accounted for about 8.1% of deaths in 2019, higher than the US rate (5.3%), and are prevalent in rural areas, where a higher percentage of the population lacks access to clean drinking water. As a result, Iran has high rates of typhoid fever and Hepatitis A and B. Likewise, overcrowding and pollution in urban centers has led to high rates of respiratory illnesses, notably tuberculosis.



In recent years, US and international sanctions (see p. 13-15 of *History and Myth*) have negatively impacted Iran's healthcare system, as the country is unable to import many necessary pharmaceuticals, medical instruments, and equipment. In particular, this strain on the healthcare system has affected Iranians with rare disorders and veterans from the Iran-Iraq War (see p. 11-12 of *History and Myth*.

COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has impacted Iran more so than other countries in MENA. The government has discouraged largescale lockdowns and quarantine measures due to ongoing economic difficulties (see p. 3-4 of *Economics and Resources*). High-ranking clerics have resisted the use of vaccines developed in the US and Britain, which has resulted in largescale vaccine hesitancy. Densely populated urban centers, notably Tehran and Qom, have seen elevated numbers of infections.

As of early 2024, the Iranian government has reported some 7.6 million cases and over 146,230 deaths. Further, public health experts suggest the government has undercounted positive cases due to a lack of testing supplies, with the accurate number of fatalities likely 2.5 times higher than the total reported.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Ancient Persia was among the first places in the world to develop agriculture. By 6000 BC, small farming communities based in villages had become widespread. By 2700 BC (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*), cities had developed as economic activity increased. Persia became a major trade hub as people in Africa, Asia, and Europe sought the region's ceramics, copper, and minerals such as soapstone and lapis lazuli. One notable trade route was the "Royal Road," named for Darius the Great, who built it in in the 5th century BC (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*), and which connected the Aegean Sea to Susa in western Persia.

The region became rich as Asian products like silks, jade and other precious stones, porcelain, tea, and spices were traded for European horses, glassware, textiles, and manufactured goods in Persia along the famed Silk Road. Technology and knowledge, such as gunpowder and methods of making paper, also spread through Persia along the Silk Road.

Trade with Europe became increasingly important during the 18th and 19th centuries, as Persia provided cheap raw materials like opium, rice, tobacco, and nuts in exchange for manufactured goods. While European traders grew rich, the Persian economy suffered considerably from instability, famines, and competition between Britain and Russia that led to military interventions.

The early 20th-century discovery of oil radically changed Iran's economy. Under British pressure, Iran's Qajar ***Shah*** (king, see p. 6 of *History and Myth*) granted oil concessions to the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and today, British Petroleum. However, many Iranians sought to nationalize AIOC to receive more benefit from

their country's oil wealth. Mohammed Mossadegh became Prime Minister in 1951 largely based on nationalization promises (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*). To avoid losing their oil interests and wary of the Soviet Union's influence in Iran, British and US intelligence agencies orchestrated a coup in 1953 that deposed Mossadegh and gave the Shah greater power.

In the 1960s, the Shah introduced economic reforms such as major land redistribution, profit sharing between agricultural and industrial workers, and other modernization efforts. Some Iranians' incomes rose sharply, though the land reforms largely failed, driving many agricultural workers to search for jobs in cities, where they faced poor living conditions and high prices. Reliance on oil revenue made Iran's economy prone to global price fluctuations, and the rapid transformation from a traditional agrarian economy to an urban industrialized one fed popular discontent.

In 1979, Iranians' frustrations with the Shah and his economic policies led to a revolution (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). Under a new constitution, the economy split into three sectors: public, including oil and natural gas, major industries, banks, utilities, communications, trade, and mass transportation; cooperative, including goods and services production and distribution; and private activities that supplement the other two sectors. The constitution also stipulates that Islamic principles corresponding to the government's religious doctrine must guide the economy. However, the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-88 (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*) devastated the Iranian economy. To foster renewed growth, the government allowed some economic reforms, permitting the establishment of private banks and creation of free trade zones with fewer economic restrictions.

Despite these reforms, Iran experienced high inflation and unemployment in the mid-2000s, which the 2009 global financial crisis exacerbated. Significant barriers to growth were US and international economic sanctions against Iran, notably a total

trade ban with the US, oil embargos, and restrictions on foreign companies doing business in Iran and domestic financial institutions. While some of these sanctions dated to the Revolution and ensuing hostage crisis (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), most were enacted between 2005-12 and focused on deterring Iran's nuclear ambitions, human rights abuses, and support for regional terrorist groups (see p. 11-13 of *Political and Social Relations*).

In 2015, a multinational nuclear agreement lifted many sanctions (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*), which temporarily boosted the Iranian economy and caused GDP to rise rapidly. Nevertheless, the US withdrew from the agreement in 2018 and reimposed sanctions that crippled Iran's economy (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations)*. As a result, between 2017-20, Iran's GDP fell from about $445 to $203 billion. Today, Iranians continue to grapple with hardship caused by the sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*), and an overreliance on volatile oil prices. Iran's economic outlook hinges largely on the possibility of sanctions relief so it can export more oil and regain access to international markets and essential imports.

Today, Iran has a huge informal sector, in 2022, according to the most recent figures and financial estimates, 36.5% of Iran's economic activity is attributed to the informal sector. The largest component of the informal sector are street vendors, who officials do not regulate as legitimate businesses (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*). Iran also struggles with illegal and black-market activities, such as smuggling and corruption. In 2022, Iran ranked 147 of 180 countries in a corruption perceptions index. The government, and notably the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*), retains tight control over a large share of the economy, owning numerous corporations and using its influence to gain valuable government contracts, loans, and tax exemptions. The IRGC profits from managing infrastructure projects, corrupt activities,

and smuggling. Although a reprieve to sanctions and high oil prices could aid Iran's economy, as of 2022, mismanagement, sanctions, and corruption make Iran's economic outlook bleak.

Services

Services comprise the largest sector of the Iranian economy, accounting for about 45% of GDP and 51% of employment in 2022. Major components include banking, finance, transportation, communications, and tourism.

Banking: Iran's banking subsector employed some 200,000 Iranians and held about $641 billion in assets in 2018. The government owns most banks and the country's largest financial institutions, and restricts foreign banking operations in Iran except for in designated free trade zones. The government tightly regulates banking and financial services according to its Islamic doctrine, notably through certain prohibitions and limitations on loans and transfer interest. These religious regulations and sanctions have resulted in antiquated banking operations that lag the rest of the global financial system.

Tourism: Despite state-run promotional efforts, Iran's tourism subsector is relatively small, generating about $48.1 billion in 2021, when Iran received 3.7 million tourists. As of 2021, some 34% of tourists visiting Iran were from Iraq, followed by Turkey (15%), Pakistan (10%), Azerbaijan (9%) and Kuwait (2%). Tourists in Iran typically visit ancient Persian ruins, historic mosques and Shi'a religious sites, and natural sites such as the Zagros Mountains or beaches along the Caspian Sea.

Industry

Industry accounts for around 40% of GDP and employs about 34% of the labor force. While much of Iranian industry supports the oil and natural gas subsectors, mining and manufacturing are also significant. Notable manufactured products include electric appliances, telecommunications equipment, industrial

machinery, paper, steel, rubber, food, wood, leather, textiles, and pharmaceuticals.

Oil and Natural Gas: While oil and natural gas are among the Iranian economy's most crucial industrial subsectors, recent sanctions have proven devastating. From 2018-19, annual oil revenue fell from $60.2 billion to $8.9 billion. At about 209 billion barrels, Iran has the world's third-largest proven oil reserves in 2021. It is a leader in crude oil production, and to a lesser extent, export. Iran is a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, an international organization of 13 major oil producing countries that coordinates the production, pricing, and sale of those countries' oil. Iran exports most its ethylene polymers to China (77%), followed by Turkey (12%) and Azerbaijan (1.6%).

Iran has 33.72 trillion cu m of natural gas, the world's second-largest proven reserves. As of 2021, Iran was the world's third-largest producer of dry natural gas, and is 2nd to Russia in holding the largest reserves of natural gas at 1,203 trillion cubic feet (TFC).

Mining: Although Iran has rich mineral resources, the mining subsector accounted for only about 3.4% of GDP in 2021, largely due to a preference for developing the oil and natural gas subsectors instead. Iran possesses the world's largest zinc deposits and large amounts of copper and gypsum. It also produces and exports iron ore, valued at over $305 million in 2022.

Agriculture

Agriculture accounts for nearly 12.8% of Iran's GDP and employs some 15% of the workforce. About 11% of Iran's total land area is arable, of which only about 25% is cultivated due to poor agricultural infrastructure and soil conditions.

Farming: Iran's varying climates allow for the cultivation of a wide range of crops, including corn, rice, wheat, barley, fruits

and vegetables, nuts, tobacco, and sugarcane. About a third of Iran's farmland is irrigated, with the most fertile soil in the western and northwestern regions. Iran also has a sizeable number of livestock, primarily cows, goats, and sheep.

Fishing: Fishing is a major industry along the coasts of the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Caspian Sea. Catches primarily include sturgeon, salmon, whitefish, trout, and shrimp. Recently, local fishers in the Persian Gulf have suffered due to international fishing fleets, often of Chinese origin, overfishing.

Currency

While the Iranian rial (ریال or IRR) is issued in 5 coin and 12 banknote values, Iranians frequently use just 3 coin (1,000, 2,000, and 5,000) and 6 banknote values (5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, 100,000, and 500,000). Between 2011-23, US$1 fluctuated between ریال11,120-44,134.

Foreign Trade

Iran's exports, totaling $15.9 billion in 2022, primarily consisted of crude oil, ethylene polymers, acyclic alcohols, iron ore, and nuts sold to China (36%), Turkey (20%), Kuwait (6.04%), Pakistan (4.79%) and India (4.11%).. In the same year, imports totaled $33.3 billion and consisted mostly of agricultural products, electronics, and manufactured goods from China (28%), the UAE (19%), Brazil 12.9%), Turkey (9%), and India (6%).

Foreign Aid

Historically, Iran was a primary recipient of foreign aid, though sanctions have complicated these efforts since the Revolution. Recently, foreign aid has focused on combating the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Iran particularly hard. In 2021, the European Union provided Iran with over $22 million in aid, and the World Bank has promised an additional $90 million to combat COVID-19 in 2022. The US did not provide Iran aid in 2020-22. Although Iran provides minimal bilateral aid, it has funded many regional insurgent and terrorist groups (see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*), spending an estimated $6.5 billion in 2019.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

In recent years, Iran's infrastructure has grown considerably due to major government efforts to modernize the country's road, rail, and telecommunications networks. The government tightly censors the media and Internet use.

Transportation

While some Iranians travel by privately-owned vehicle, most use public transportation, which often segregates by gender (see p. 3-4 of *Time and Space*). Most cities and towns have local public bus or minibus services that provide transport across Iran. Tehran has one the largest and busiest subway systems in the Middle East and Central Asia, which transports several million passengers each day. Of Iran's other large cities, only Mashhad has a small subway system, though others are planned or under construction.

Roadways: Nearly 121,000 mi of Iran's over 139,000 mi of roadways are paved. Some 9,800 mi of roads are highways or freeways that connect many of Iran's cities, towns, and villages. Major roadways connect Iran with Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan.

Railways: Iran has about 7,315 mi of railways connecting major cities and towns. In 1938, Iran completed the famous Trans-Iranian railway, which connects the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. In recent years, the government has expanded the rail network, which included a passenger railway between Yazd and Eqlid in central Iran. Today, most rail expansion efforts focus on improving cargo transport infrastructure.

Ports and Waterways: Iran has just 530 mi of waterways, and only the Karun River is navigable by flat-bottomed boats. Iran borders the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's busiest and most strategically significant sea routes, particularly for oil and natural gas transport (see p. 5 of *Economics and Resources*). While the United Nations regulates the Strait, Iran maintains a military

presence on seven of its eight major islands. Iran's major ports are Bandar-e Asaluyeh, Bandar Abbas, and Bandar-e Imam Khomeini, all located on the Persian Gulf.

Airways: Of Iran's 319 airports, about half have paved runways. Iran's busiest airports are Tehran's Mehrabad, which served 12.3 million passengers in 2022 (only offers domestic flights), Imam Khomeini International Airport, and Mashhad International Airport. Iran has 22 airlines, the largest of which is national flag carrier Iran Air. Iranian airlines are sometimes unable to acquire new aircraft and parts due to international sanctions (see p. 13-15 of *History and Myth*). American and most major European airlines do not offer flights to Iran.

Energy

In 2021, Iran generated about 94% of its energy from fossil fuels, primarily natural gas and oil. Iran has over 13,000 mi of natural gas and 5,400 mi of oil pipelines. While Iran generates some 4% of its energy from hydroelectric plants, about 1% comes from nuclear energy. Iran's nuclear program is highly controversial due to its parallel pursuit of nuclear weapons (see p. 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations)*. While minimal energy production in Iran is from other renewable sources like wind and solar, officials have plans to expand renewable energy generation in the coming years.

Media

Although the Iranian constitution protects freedom of the press, the government tightly controls the media (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). It is illegal to promote any ideas that the government deems "detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public," such as criticism of Islam and Iranian political or religious leaders, and "propagating luxury or extravagance." Punishments for violators include imprisonment, lashings, and sometimes even execution. Officials frequently jail journalists in Iran and pressure Iranian journalists abroad. The Iranian government also tightly controls online media by banning access to news outlets and social media networks.

Print Media: Of Iran's 300 daily newspapers, about 12 circulate nationally. While most publications are in Persian (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*), the government also publishes three national English-language newspapers: *Tehran Times*, *Iran Daily*, and *Iran News*. Some of the most widely circulated newspapers are *Kayhan*, owned by Supreme Leader ***Ayatollah*** (a title given to high-ranking clerics) Ali Khamenei, *Resalat*, and *Jaam-e Jam*, published by government broadcaster, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Despite no official statistics on print readership, it likely has declined considerably in recent years, as many Iranians consume news from online outlets.

TV and Radio: The IRIB controls all radio and TV broadcasting in Iran, operating some 35 regional, 19 national, and a few global channels. Programming includes culture, science, news, and other topics. *Press TV* is Iran's only English-language TV station. No private or independent TV or radio stations operate in Iran, which bans all Western radio and TV programs. Though illegal, many Iranians access foreign TV shows in Persian via satellite. The IRIB also broadcasts 16 national radio stations, notably *IRIB World Service English* and an international news radio service.

Telecommunications

Since the 1990s, Iran has expanded high-speed broadband, fiber optic, and 4G telecommunications networks throughout the country. Telecommunications companies are mostly state-owned and dominated by the Telecommunications Company of Iran. In 2022, Iran had some 33 landlines and 165 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people.

Internet: Iran's Internet penetration was about 79% in 2021, and most Iranians rely on their mobile devices for Internet access. In 2020, the government announced an initiative to provide mobile Internet access to all Iranians and expand broadband to 80% of homes by 2025. Officials tightly control Internet usage and block websites. They also cut access during periods of social unrest.

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