

PROFILE OF IRAN

SIZE: 636,296 square miles, slightly larger than Alaska

POPULATION: 68 million (CIA, 2005)

ETHNICITY: Persian (51%), Azeri (24%), Kurd (7%), Arab (3%), other (15%)

RELIGION: Shi'ite Muslim (89%), Sunni Muslim (9%) other (2%)

LANGUAGES: Persian and Persian dialects (58%), Turkic and Turkic dialects (26%), Kurdish (9%), others (7%)

LIFE EXPECTANCY: 69 years.

UNEMPLOYMENT

RATE: 11%, 40% of the population live below the poverty line (CIA, 2004 est.)

CLIMATE: Subtropical along the northern border with the Caspian Sea; elsewhere arid or semi-arid.

INDUSTRIES: Petroleum. Iran has proven oil reserves second in the world only to Saudi Arabia, but its annual production is far less than that of the United States or Russian Federation.

CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: Effects of drought, including desertification, wetland losses and soil degradation; urban pollution related to vehicle emissions and refinery operations; inadequate supplies of potable water.



Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

FROM PERSIA TO IRAN

The Persian Empire once extended from India and central Asia in the east, northward to the region that is now Turkey, and southwest into Egypt. The heart of the empire – now known as Iran – has extensive and fertile farmlands that have supported human populations for thousands of years. Archaeological evidence suggests that goats were first domesticated in this region about 12,000 years ago, and that bricks were used for construction as early as 6000 BC. Wine was first made in Persia around 5000 BC, an era which saw the first use of the lute, the ancestor of the modern guitar. As early as 1700 BC there were windmills in use in Persia, and by 500 BC there was the Royal Road, the first postal delivery service; the first cultivation of spinach, and domestication of the chicken.

At the crossroads between western Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, Persia has been ruled for more than 2000 years by conquerors from the north, east and south. The Persian Empire once rivaled the cultures of India and China, producing exquisite art, cuisine, music and poetry. Persian rugs, once woven by nomads to warm their shelters against winter nights, were refined over the centuries into works of art, known for their elaborate geometric and floral patterns. With Persian (Farsi) as its dominant language, and most of its people followers of Shi'ite Islam, the modern state of Persia maintained a unique cultural identity in the Middle East.

THE END OF A DYNASTY

For most of the 20th century, Persia was ruled by the Pahlavi dynasty, with the Shah as the reigning monarch. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was the last of the dynasty, ruling from 1941 to 1979. Under his leadership, Iran grew wealthy from its huge oil reserves, but by the 1970s, the gap was widening between the extremely wealthy, who profited from the oil boom, and the poor who struggled to feed their families. As the Shah's regime became increasingly repressive, independence movements gained strength. The Shah was forced out of office in 1979 in a nearly bloodless revolution, led by a Shi'ite religious leader, the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini, whose return from exile was welcomed across Iran as a sign of desperately needed change.

The revolution was welcomed across Iran and although the Ayatollah made it clear that he meant to restore Islamic rule in Iran, with himself as the final authority (*faqih*) in all matters of public and private life, people hoped it would bring democracy and with it a new openness. The euphoria that brought revolution was soon tempered as universities were shut down, and people were arrested or forced to leave the country for opposing the Ayatollah's will.

In 1980, the new republic was attacked by its neighbor, Iraq, in what was known at the time as the Persian Gulf War. The headwaters of the Gulf are important to both countries for oil exports, and control over the southern borders of Iran and Iraq had been an ongoing source of dispute. An uneasy truce was declared after eight years, but prisoners were still being exchanged in 2003.

The past twenty years have seen a struggle for power in Iran between moderate and conservative leaders. The Ayatollah remains the highest authority in the land; following Khomeini's death in 1989, his designated successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, assumed this role. The ruling clerics are the final authority in all aspects of public and religious life, even approving slates of candidates for public office.

AN ERA OF MODERATION

From the election of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as president in 1989 through the two terms of President Mohammad Khatami ending in 2005, Iran's political leaders sought a greater openness in the economy and in Iran's dealings with other countries. Rafsanjani focused on economic growth and encouraged cooperation between universities and the private sector. Khatami emphasized political reform, although his programs were often overruled by Iran's clerical leadership. This time of moderation made it possible for Iranian artists and writers living overseas to return home, and to find audiences in Iran for their work. The work of such great Iranian filmmakers as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami flourished during this era, finding international acclaim even when they were banned for many years from Iranian theaters.

MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD IS ELECTED

In 2005, the era of Iranian 'moderation' came to an end with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. Ahmadinejad, the first non-cleric to be president of Iran in 24 years, was elected in a conservative backlash against the reforms of the previous decade. Twenty years of the Islamic republic had seen the population soaring as the number of jobs declines; those who voted for Ahmadinejad tended to be young people who need work, and generally more conservative than the affluent, middle class who benefited from moderate leadership. Since his election, Ahmadinejad has brought back the hard-line, Islamic rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini, and also established a highly controversial uranium-enrichment program.

ON THE SHORES OF THE CASPIAN SEA

The Caspian Sea is called a sea because at the southern end its water is salty (a relic of the vast ocean that once overspread the region). It is called the world's largest lake because the northern end is fed by more than 100 rivers, and the water tastes fresh. The Caspian Sea is fully landlocked – it has no outflows to the ocean. At its southern end, along the coast of Iran, the waters are more than 3,300 feet deep.

The Caspian Sea is rich in natural resources, including several species of sturgeon, whose eggs are prized as caviar. Perhaps more important, however, is that its underlying basin holds one of the largest reserves of oil and natural gas on earth. Of the five countries that share the shoreline, four became independent since the collapse of the Soviet Union – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan. The sudden shift in national boundaries has created opportunities and controversy, as oil companies invest huge sums for drilling and pipeline projects that sometimes conflict with national priorities and environmental concerns.



Anzali Port, October 10, 2007. Photograph taken by Afshin Khorrami, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.
URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Anzali.jpg>

The Iranian coastline, at the foot of the Alborz mountains, is a popular vacation destination for Iranians, who enjoy the beautiful beaches, hot springs, and balmy climate. Severe limits on caviar exports have sharply

curtailed this once-thriving business, but tea farming, shipping, food production, fishing and tourism support the local economy in cities and towns along the coast.

CUISINE OF NORTHERN IRAN

Iranian cuisine has its origins in the Persian Empire that was founded more than 2,500 years ago by Cyrus the Great. Treasures excavated at Persepolis, site of the imperial palaces, offer hints of the elegant cuisine of ancient Persia. A variety of serving dishes suggests meals of several courses, accompanied by wine and beer. Ingredients came from all corners of the empire; from the east came citrus fruits, eggplant and rice, as well as rare spices such as cinnamon and mint. From the fertile soils of Iran came dates and figs, pomegranates, saffron, cumin and nuts.

Rice is the base of modern Iranian cuisine and is often served with *kababs* (grilled lamb or chicken), or in stews called *khoresh*. The meal begins with tea, served in a glass cup with no handle. Dinner is served with herbs, pickles and flatbreads – *lavash* – and dessert, which might include ice cream, rosewater and pistachios. For its ancient origins and wide influence on other regional cuisines, Iranian cooking is sometimes called “the mother cuisine”.

Among the specialties of northern Iran:

Mirza Ghasemi – an appetizer that blends sautéed eggplant and tomatoes with eggs, seasoned with garlic.

Chelo Kabab – the national dish, meat or fish marinated with onions and seasonings, skewered and grilled, and served with fluffy Persian rice.

Khoresh Fesenjan – a dark, rich stew that combines pomegranate, walnuts, turmeric, cinnamon, cardamom, onions and garlic with fowl, such as chicken, duck or quail.



Chelo Kabab. Photograph by Amir85, October 16, 2005, courtesy Wikimedia Commons: Chelo kabab koobideh.jpg

ONLINE RESOURCES

Country Profile/Timeline: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/790877.stm

The World Factbook: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html>

The Economist. "Special Report: The Revolution Strikes Back." URL: http://www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9466834

Maps of Iran: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/iran.html>

Websites:

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Energy Information Administration: "The Caspian Sea." URL: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Caspian/Background.html>

International Institute for Caspian Studies: "The Caspian Sea." URL: <http://www.caspianstudies.com/basicinfo/caspian%20history.htm>

The Food Museum: "Eating in Iran: Pleasures of Persian Cuisine." URL: <http://www.foodmuseum.com/persiancuisine1.html>

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