



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▶ ASIA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Iran, just larger than Alaska, covers 636,293 square miles (1,648,000 square kilometers). Most of Iran is a plateau 4,000 feet (1,200 meters) above sea level, rimmed with two major mountain chains. The Zagros Mountains dominate western Iran, while the Elburz Mountains are found in the north. Mount Damavand, the highest peak (at 18,386 feet, or 5,604 meters) and an active volcano, is located in the Elburz mountain range. The desert to the east is largely uninhabited, as are the mountains. Narrow coastal plains run along the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. The central plateau is very arid, and long, hot, dry summers prevail. Winters are cold in the north except for along the Caspian Sea. Fall and spring are relatively short. The country is subject to frequent earthquakes.

The government has reserved land as a wildlife refuge in an effort to save endangered species such as the Caspian tiger, lynx, and desert onager. Animals such as wolves, bears, foxes, and mountain goats are commonly found in Iran's mountainous deciduous forests. More than three hundred species of birds permanently reside in the country.

History. The area of present-day Iran, known anciently as Persia, was ruled in the sixth century B.C. by such powerful emperors as Darius and Cyrus the Great. Arabs conquered the area in the seventh century, introducing the people to Islam. Both the Seljuk Turks and the Mongols (under Genghis Khan) ruled in Iran at one time. Persian rule was revived when the Safavid Dynasty essentially set up the first national government in the 1500s. The Safavids also established Shi'ism as the state religion, linking it with nationalism. They were interested in preventing further expansion of the Ottoman Empire, whose rulers were Sunni Muslims. The Qajar Dynasty of the

1800s was followed by the Pahlavi Dynasty in the 20th century. This dynasty was created when a military officer, Reza Khan, seized control of the government in 1921 and reigned (from 1925) as Reza Shah Pahlavi. He did much to modernize the country. His son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (known as the Shah), continued the modernization when he took power in 1941. He sponsored literacy campaigns, voting rights for women, and industrialization. Despite these goals, his neglect of some basic social problems and his lack of emphasis on Islam made his reign unpopular among various groups.

In 1979, the Shah fled Iran in response to popular unrest. The *Ayatollah* (a religious leader) Ruhollah Khomeini, exiled leader of the movement against the monarchy, returned at that time to establish the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini ordered that all laws and practices follow strict Islamic principles. When the Shah was admitted to the United States for medical treatment, Iran's revolutionaries responded by seizing the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and holding its personnel hostage until January 1981. The United States severed ties with Iran, imposed trade sanctions, and still has no official diplomatic relations with the government. Many Iranian policies and actions, including the sponsorship of terrorism, alienated Western nations. A war with Iraq (1980–88) over the disputed region of Shatt-al Arab drained the economy and crippled many industries.

Khomeini died in 1989. The Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khomeini, who had been president, succeeded him as the supreme leader (*Valli-e-faghih*). The *Hojatolislam* (a religious title) Hashemi Rafsanjani became the new president. Favored for his moderate policies, he was reelected in 1993. In 1995, hopes for further liberalization and better relations with the West

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darkened when the United States imposed a full trade embargo on Iran after labeling it a terrorist state.

Conditions improved in 1997 when a moderate presidential candidate, Mohammad Khatami, stunned conservatives by winning office in a landslide. Despite strong opposition from conservative clerics, President Khatami succeeded in loosening some social restrictions. He also improved relations with former regional enemies like Saudi Arabia and with European Union members.

The government continues to be divided in two ideological camps. Those in support of the president believe in "Islamic democracy," in which freedom of expression can flourish within the standards of Islamic conduct, but the "chaos" of Western diplomacy is avoided. The clerics, who govern the judiciary, consider such policies too liberal and thus detrimental to true Islamic behavior.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Iran's population of 68.3 million is growing annually by 1.08 percent. Tehran, the capital and largest city, has 12 million inhabitants. Other major cities are Mashhad, Tabriz, Esfahan, Abadan, and Shiraz. About two-thirds of the population lives in urban areas. While urbanization was the trend during the 1970s, the opposite was encouraged in the 1980s. Nomadic life has always played a role in traditional Iranian society, and more than 10 percent of the population is nomadic or seminomadic, including the Lur, Bakhtiari, and Qashqa'i. Most Iranians are ethnic Persians (51 percent). Smaller groups include Azeris (24 percent), Gilakis and Mazandarani (8), Kurds (7), Arabs (3), Lurs (2), Baluchis (2), and Turkmen (2), among others.

Language. Iran's official language is Persian, or Farsi, but many other languages and Persian dialects are spoken by the nation's different ethnic groups. Turkic, the most widely spoken language after Farsi, is the language of Azeris and Turkmen. Other major languages include Kurdish, Luri, and Arabic. All school instruction is in Farsi.

Religion. Iran is the world's most populous Shi'i (Shi'ite) Muslim country. About 89 percent of Iranians are Shi'ite Muslims, while some 10 percent are Sunni Muslims. Shi'ite Islam is the state religion and has been since the 1500s. Before that time, most Persians were Sunni Muslims. Shi'ism adds a strong nationalist element to the religious principles of Islam.

All Muslims believe in a day of judgment and a single God (*Allah*), who chose Muhammad to be his prophet. The *Qur'an* (Koran), the scripture of Islam, is composed of *Allah's* revelations to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Revelations to various Biblical prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus) are also acknowledged by Muslims. They accept Jesus as a major prophet but not as the son of *Allah*. Muslims show devotion through the Five Pillars of Islam: *shahada*, professing that there is no God but *Allah* and Muhammad is his prophet; *salat*, praying five times daily while facing Makkah, Saudi Arabia; *zakat*, giving money to the poor; *saum*, fasting during the month of *Ramadan*; and *hajj*, making a pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime.

Shi'ism reveres Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad; her husband, Ali; their two sons, Hassan and Hussein; and their descendants (*Imams*). Shi'ite Muslims, unlike the Sunnis, believe Ali was selected by Muhammad as his successor. Shi'ites consider the *Imams* to be holy men who have the right to leadership. The 12th *Imam* disappeared; it is believed he will reappear as a messiah to guide Muslims in the future.

Since the 1979 revolution, the clergy (*mullahs*) has maintained a strong conservative and fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Persons belonging to another religion are allowed to maintain their beliefs, but they are subject to civil law as established on Islamic principles. There are about 350,000 Baha'is in Iran, along with 80,000 Christians and 30,000 Jews. Zoroastrianism, the religion displaced by Islam in the seventh century, is also officially recognized and has some followers. With the exception of the Baha'is, each minority group has representation in the *Majlis* (parliament). The Baha'i Faith is outlawed because the Shi'ites consider it an apostate branch of Islam and a British-created political threat.

General Attitudes. Iranians value education, culture, cleverness, and wisdom. Their perception of time is more flexible than the West's. Iranians do not stress punctuality over individuals' needs, which are considered more important than schedules. Although political radicalism prevailed in the 1980s, Iranians remained hospitable and open to others. They like foreigners as a whole, even people from the United States. Many citizens support a more open society and greater integration with the world community. Iranians also continue to revere the Ayatollah Khomeini for his reforms and leadership.

Personal Appearance. Iranians dress formally and conservatively in public. Personal cleanliness is important. Men usually wear Western-style clothing, although some, especially religious leaders, wear traditional robes and turbans. Islam generally requires men to wear long sleeves. Most men have beards.

Women are encouraged to be covered from head to foot in public. During the 1980s, a veil and a black or dark-colored *chador* (a long dress) were encouraged. However, moderations have allowed women to go without the veil and to wear other outer clothing if it is loose fitting. Even so, only a woman's hands and face may be visible in public. The *chador* often covers stylish, modern clothing. The traditional black head covering (*maghna-eh*), while still worn, is being replaced by more colorful scarves. Younger women may even let a little hair show on the forehead, and some women wear makeup. At home, Iranians often dress in comfortable pajamas. They may also receive guests while dressed in pajamas, which are for relaxing as well as sleeping.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Proper etiquette during greetings is considered essential in Iran. A handshake is customary. To show respect, one gives a slight bow or nod while shaking hands. A man does not shake a woman's hand unless she offers it first. Iranians of the same sex often kiss each other on the cheek as a greeting and sign of affection. People generally stand when someone (especially an older or more prominent person) enters the room for the first time and when someone leaves. Shaking hands with a child shows respect for the parents.

A typical Farsi greeting is *Dorood* (Greetings); an appropriate response is *Dorood-bar-to* (Greetings to you). People often use Arabic greetings such as *Salam* (Peace). A common parting phrase is *Khoda hafiz* (May God protect you). Iranians use formal titles and last names in greetings to show respect. Following the initial greeting, a person asks about the family and health of the other.

Gestures. Iranians pass objects with the right hand or both hands but not with the left hand alone. They do not allow the soles of the feet to point at any person. Crossing the legs is generally not acceptable. Slouching or stretching one's legs in a group is offensive. To show respect and maintain proper dis-

tance between genders, men and women do not always make eye contact during conversation. Men and women do not display affection in public, even if married. However, members of the same sex do show friendship. To beckon someone, one waves all fingers with the palm facing down. Tilting the head up quickly means “no” and tilting it down means “yes.” Twisting the head means “what?” or indicates admiration. Extending the thumb is vulgar.

Visiting. Hospitality is a cherished tradition in Iran. Iranian philosophy claims a guest is a gift from (or friend of) *Allah*. Respecting the guest is a way of respecting *Allah*. Guests therefore are the center of attention in an Iranian home and everything is done to make them feel comfortable. The oldest man present receives the greatest respect. Because visiting (*did-o-bazdid*) is so much a part of the culture, families and friends visit one another often, even several times a month if they live close by. Iranians enjoy getting together for conversation, picnics, or just to enjoy each other’s company.

Visitors remove their shoes before entering carpeted areas of a home, although this is not often practiced in larger cities. A polite guest compliments the host generously and accepts compliments in return. However, one avoids complimenting an object in the home, as the host may feel an obligation to offer the object to the guest. Dinner guests customarily take a flowering plant, cut flowers, or candy to the host. Iranians do not open gifts in front of the giver. If one is offered gifts, refreshments, or invitations from a friend, it is polite to decline a few times before graciously accepting and thanking him or her several times.

Eating. The midday meal is the most important meal of the day. Dinner usually is served after 8 p.m. Elaborate Persian meals are often prepared for guests, and a host may insist they eat several helpings. Food is eaten with the right hand only. Hosts usually offer tea to guests. During *Ramadan*, Muslims abstain from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk; in the evenings, families and friends get together to eat and visit.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The family unit is strong in Iran and provides its members with a sense of identity, security, and social organization. The father is the undisputed head of the household. Large families with many children, especially boys, are preferred. It is legal for a man to have as many as four wives if he can provide for each equally and if he has permission from his other wife or wives; permission from the government is also necessary. However, most men choose to have only one wife.

Relatives remain close. The elderly are respected and cared for by younger members of the extended family. Parents feel a lifelong commitment to children, often providing them with financial support well after marriage. Regardless of their age, unmarried persons live with their parents until they marry. Most families are able to provide for their own basic necessities, and a growing upper class enjoys many modern amenities. If someone has two family names, the second is the official surname. It is often based on the person’s hometown.

Dating and Marriage. Dating as practiced in the West is uncommon; members of the opposite sex are rarely alone with each other unless married, related, or engaged. Daughters are usually protected by their families to the point that they do not speak to strangers until married. More traditional families will limit a daughter’s education to keep her home.

Marriage is highly valued, and most people expect to marry and have a family. Divorce is very rare. Most marriages are

arranged by families. In the past, this meant that many girls married their cousins. But new attitudes have developed in some areas regarding education, work, and freedom in selecting marriage partners.

Women marry between the ages of 18 and 25. Men marry somewhat later because of military service or because they are not earning enough money to start a family. Weddings are elaborate celebrations lasting as long as three days. Couples often choose to have a temporary marriage (*sigheh*) as a trial marriage or because the *sigheh* wedding is much less expensive than a conventional wedding. The *sigheh* can last between a few days and 99 years. A woman marrying in this arrangement and any children born in the marriage do not have the same rights and privileges as conventional wives and children, but they are accepted as legitimate. Both the man and the woman must consent to a *sigheh*, and women marrying for the first time must have parental consent. When a *sigheh* is terminated, or if a regularly married couple divorces, the woman may not marry again for at least one hundred days.

Diet. The diet varies throughout the country. Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol. Rice and wheat bread are the most common staple foods. Rice is often served with a meat-and-vegetable stew. Yogurt is served with rice or other foods. Fresh vegetables are important in the diet, and fresh fruit is a favorite dessert. White cheeses are also popular.

Recreation. Iranians enjoy soccer, wrestling, the martial arts, basketball, volleyball, and table tennis. The urban population enjoys going to the movies. However, socializing provides the greatest opportunity for relaxation. Iranians also visit teahouses, shop in bazaars, and stroll through the streets.

The Arts. Persian carpets are an ancient Iranian art form. Words and symbols often adorn the carpets instead of pictures and images, which are considered idolatrous according to Islamic belief. The avoidance of idolatry also led to the well-developed tradition of Iranian calligraphy. Literature, especially poetry, is loved universally; the works of Hafez and others have become world classics. Iranian music often is inspired by poetry. Traditional Iranian instruments include the *tar* (ancestor to the guitar), the *santur* (a stringed instrument played with a hammer), and the *kamanche* (a spiked fiddle).

Holidays. Religious festivals and the New Year are set according to the lunar calendar; official public holidays are determined by the solar (Gregorian) calendar. The Iranian New Year (*Naw Ruz*) is celebrated around the end of March in connection with the spring equinox. Iranians mark this holiday with visits, gifts, and feasts. Businesses close and the celebrations last four days. National holidays include Revolution Day (11 Feb.), Oil Nationalization Day (20 Mar.), Islamic Republic Day (1 Apr.), National Picnic Day (2 Apr.), Armed Forces Day (18 Apr.), Anniversary of Khomeini’s Exile (4 May), and Anniversary of Khomeini’s Death (5 May).

Religious holidays occur on different days each year. They include feasts for *Aid-e-fitr* to end the month of *Ramadan* and *Aid-e-adha* to mark the end of the *hajj* and to commemorate Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. Other holidays mark the birth and death of the prophet Muhammad and the *Imams*. *Aid-e-khadir* celebrates Muhammad’s choosing of Ali (Fatima’s husband) as his successor.

Commerce. Iranians conduct business Saturday through Thursday. Office hours are usually from 8 a.m. to noon and 2 to 6 p.m. Summer hours may differ; businesses often close in the hot afternoon and reopen for a short time in the evening. Many businesses are only open until noon on Thursday and

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most close on Friday, the Muslim day of worship. Keeping a business client waiting is not considered an insult; clients often are served refreshments while waiting. Shops and retail stores are often open from 8 a.m. to late in the evening, with a break from noon to 3 p.m. Bartering is expected at open-air markets.

SOCIETY

Government. Iran is a theocratic democracy. Elected by the people to a four-year term, the president (currently Seyyed Mohammad Khatami) is head of government and official chief of state. Iran's supreme religious leader, the Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei, holds ultimate political power. A 24-member Council of Guardians (comprised of religious and lay leaders) approves candidates for president, appoints judicial authorities, and has authority over the constitution. Twelve members are elected; 12 are appointed. The Council of Guardians must approve all legislation passed by the 290-seat Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majlis*), whose members are elected to four-year terms. All laws must be in harmony with the doctrines of Islam, as interpreted by the Council. The voting age is 16. Women were given the right to vote in 1962.

Economy. Oil accounts for 70 percent of all export earnings. Iran also has one of the world's largest reserves of natural gas and one of the largest copper deposits. After the 1979 revolution, major industries were nationalized and became inefficient. War and embargoes took a toll on the once prosperous economy. Diversification is a major priority. Attempts to liberalize the economy are generally opposed by conservative politicians, but some reforms have been made. The government has signed natural gas contracts with European firms, and foreign investment is on the rise. Many nations now ignore the trade embargo imposed by the United States. Considerable challenges remain, as inflation and unemployment are high. About one-third of the labor population is employed in agriculture, one-fourth in industry, and the remainder in services. The currency is the Iranian *rial* (IRR).

Transportation and Communications. Iran has a transportation system that is well developed, with highways, railroads, ports, and several airports. Buses and minibuses provide most public transportation in the cities. A metro rail service operates in Tehran. The number of private cars is increasing.

All parts of the country are accessible by telephone, but only a small number of homes have a private line. About 80 percent of households have televisions, and almost all have radios. Restrictions on satellite dishes have lessened to a degree. Internet access is limited by law, but the country has many internet cafes. Although the conservative judiciary has shut down most liberal newspapers, the print media has somewhat more freedom than the broadcast media.

Education. Elementary schooling, lasting five years, is compulsory for all children beginning at age seven. Most complete this level. Elementary schools often run on two shifts; half of the students attend in the morning and half in the afternoon. This allows the growing population to receive an education despite a shortage of buildings and teachers. Boys and girls attend separate classes, but not necessarily separate schools. Nearly three-fourths of elementary students go on to secondary school. Secondary students attend three years of "guid-

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	106 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	86 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$6,000
Adult literacy rate	84 percent (male); 70 (female)
Infant mortality rate	44 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 71 (female)

ance" (general education) followed by three years of "high school." Upon completion of high school, students may begin a trade career or complete a seventh year of school called "pre-university." Islamic studies are stressed over secular training at most levels, but the sciences and math are popular subjects to study. The University of Tehran, provincial universities, and several smaller universities provide higher education.

Health. Most public health services are run by the government, though some are divided between the government and private sector. Government facilities and private doctors accept the government health insurance that covers public employees and their families, but private hospitals demand a cash deposit upon admission. Typhoid, measles, dysentery, and malaria are prevalent. Still, more than 90 percent of children are immunized against major childhood diseases. The infant mortality rate is dropping slowly, while life expectancy is rising.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In February 2004, conservative candidates won an overwhelming victory in controversial elections for the Islamic Consultative Assembly. More than 2,500 reformist candidates were unable to run for office after being banned by the conservative Council of Guardians. Reformists had previously dominated the Assembly. After some reformist groups urged voters to boycott the polls, voter turnout was estimated as low as 50 percent.
- A major earthquake struck southeastern Iran in December 2003, killing more than 40,000 people and leveling the city of Bam.
- Under international pressure, Iran announced in November 2003 that it would suspend its uranium enrichment program and allow UN inspectors greater access to its nuclear facilities. Iran was widely condemned for its failure to properly disclose the program but denied that the uranium was intended for use in nuclear weapons.
- In an effort to lower the birthrate, the government now requires couples to take a family planning course before they marry. The law, along with other government-sponsored family planning initiatives, has brought the birthrate to levels comparable to those in industrialized nations.

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