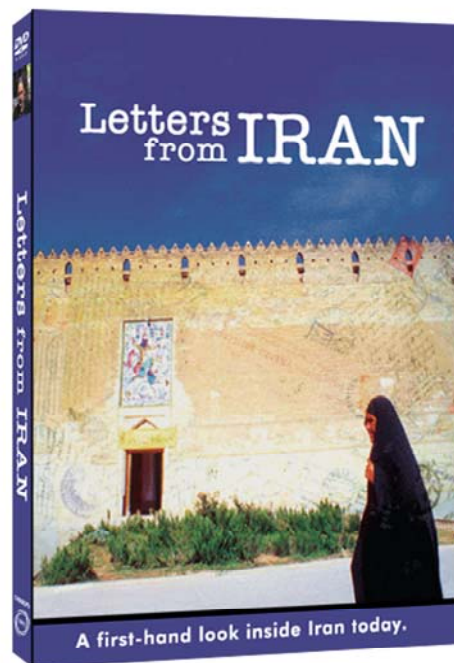




Letters From Iran

Guidebook



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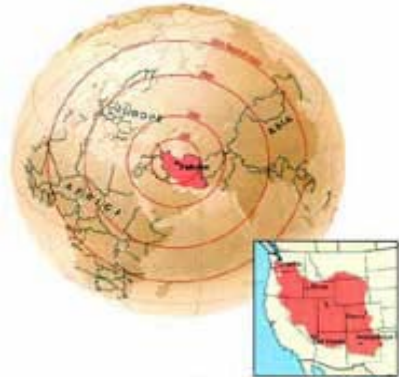
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COUNTRY PROFILE: IRAN

COUNTRY

Formal Name: Islamic Republic of Iran (Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran).



Short Form: Iran.

Term for Citizen(s): Iranian(s).

Capital: Tehran.

Other Major Cities (in order of population): Mashhad, Esfahan, Tabriz, Shiraz, Karaj, Ahvaz, Qom, and Kermanshah.

Independence: In the modern era, Iran always has existed as an independent country.

Public Holidays: The national holiday, Islamic Revolution Day, celebrates the victory of the Islamic Revolution on February 11, 1979. Other official holidays are Dawn (the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from 14 years of foreign exile on February 1, 1979), Noruz (Iranian New Year, March 21), Islamic Republic Day (April 1), Thirteenth Day of New Year (April 2), and several Islamic religious holidays that are reckoned in accordance with the lunar calendar and thus do not re-occur on the same dates each year.

Flag: The flag, adopted after the 1978–79 Revolution, features three horizontal bars, green (on top), white, and red, representing, respectively, Islam, peace, and courage. The bars are divided by stylized script. The white bar features a centered, red, abstract representation of the name Allah in the shape of a tulip.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Early History: The first Iranian state was the Achaemenian Empire, which was established by Cyrus the Great in 546 B.C. Alexander the Great conquered the empire in 330 B.C. The Greek rule was followed by the Parthians, who ruled from 247 B.C. until A.D. 224, and the Sassanians, who ruled from A.D. 224 until the Arabs conquered Iran in A.D. 651. The Arabs brought with them Islam, which eventually became the predominant religion. In the centuries that followed, Iran was ruled by a succession of Arab, Iranian, and Turkic dynasties. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol leader Genghis Khan invaded the disunified territory of Iran, and Mongol dynasties subsequently ruled Iran for nearly two centuries. In 1501 the Iranian Safavis created a strong centralized empire and established Shia Islam as the official religion.

The Qajars and Pahlavis: In 1794 the Qajar family established a dynasty that would rule Iran until 1925. A popular desire for accountable government and resentment of intrusion by foreign interests led to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–6 and the formation of a parliament. In 1921 army officer Reza Khan provided military support for a coup against the government; he was named minister of defense, then prime minister. In 1925, he became shah of Iran, adopting the surname of Pahlavi. As Reza Shah Pahlavi, he restored order and sought to modernize the economy and society and to forge cultural links abroad. However, in World War II he was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi.

In the 1960s, Iran recovered from the economic disruption of the oil nationalization period, but the authoritarian rule of the shah provoked political discontent. During this period Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini developed a following as an antigovernment leader and was sent into exile in 1964. Between 1965 and 1977, Iran enjoyed improved prosperity and stability. However, there was no liberalization of the political system, and repression coupled with resentment of an increased Western presence fueled antigovernment protests in 1977 that developed into a nationwide revolutionary movement. From his exile base in Iraq, Khomeini emerged as the leader of a strong opposition movement. The shah decided to leave the country, and his government was unable to stem what had become a revolutionary tide. Khomeini returned from exile on February 1, 1979, refused to recognize the authority of the shah's prime minister, and appointed a provisional government.

The Islamic Republic of Iran: An Islamic republic was officially proclaimed on April 1, 1979. In November 1979, students occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held 53 U.S. diplomats hostage for the next 14 months. This incident led to the collapse of the provisional government and a decisive break in U.S.-Iranian relations. Between 1980 and 1988, serious differences between the moderate and militant factions of the revolutionary government were held in check by the need to maintain internal unity during an indecisive war with Iraq that resulted in more than 200,000 Iranian deaths.

In 1989 the death of Khomeini removed the one figure with authority to arbitrate between the two mutually antagonistic political factions of the post-revolutionary elite. During the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–97), reformers controlled a majority of seats in parliament until 1992 and supported Rafsanjani's policies for economic reform and the normalization of relations with neighboring countries. The conservatives won a majority of seats in both the 1992 and 1996 parliamentary elections and subsequently used their position in the legislature to weaken or stop outright many reforms proposed by the Rafsanjani government. The administrations of Rafsanjani's successor, Mohammad Khatami (in office 1997–2005), encountered the same resistance. Reformers won a majority of seats in the 2000 parliamentary elections and then enacted several notable pieces of reform legislation in the ensuing term. Having lost control of the parliament, conservatives tried to use their influence in the judiciary and bureaucracy to impede reforms they perceived as threatening their positions. Conservatives regained control of the parliament in the February 2004 elections.

Iran's foreign relations had improved under Khatami, but in the early 2000s Iran's ostensible support of terrorist groups in the Middle East and conflict with the European Union and the United States over Iran's nuclear program eroded earlier progress. Iran's international position was jeopardized by the construction of nuclear processing plants to

provide fuel for its nuclear energy generating facility at Bushehr, which was being built with significant technical input from Russia. In mid-2005 the surprise election of conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president led Iran to adopt more confrontational international positions, especially vis-à-vis limitations on its nuclear fuel processing program and its attitude toward Israel. Within Iran, moderate and conservative factions concurred in defending the nuclear program against international interference.

GEOGRAPHY



Image courtesy of the CIA World Factbook

Iraq on the west and Afghanistan and Pakistan on the east; it borders the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the south and Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and Turkmenistan in the north.

Size: Iran's total area is 1.65 million square kilometers, of which 1.64 million square kilometers—an area slightly larger than Alaska—is land mass.

Natural Resources: Iran has enormous reserves of oil and natural gas. Oil reserves are estimated at about 130 billion barrels (third in the world behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq), and natural gas reserves are estimated at 20 trillion cubic meters (second in the world to Russia). Mineral resources currently exploited include bauxite, chromium, coal, copper, gold, iron ore, red oxide, salt, strontium, sulfur, turquoise, and uranium.

Environmental Factors: Especially in urban areas, vehicle emissions, refinery operations, and industrial effluents contribute to poor air quality. Most cars use leaded gas and lack emissions control equipment. Tehran is rated as one of the world's most polluted cities. Much of Iran's territory suffers from desertification and/or deforestation. Industrial and urban wastewater runoff has contaminated rivers and coastal waters and threatened drinking water supplies. Wetlands and bodies of freshwater increasingly are being destroyed as industry and agriculture expand, and oil and chemical spills have harmed aquatic life in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Iran contends that the international

rush to develop oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea presents that region with a new set of environmental threats.

SOCIETY

Population: In mid-2005 Iran's population was estimated at 68 million, of which about one-third lived in rural settlements and two-thirds in urban population centers.

Demography: According to a 2005 estimate, 27.1 percent of Iran's population was younger than 15, and only 4.9 percent was older than 64; the population was 51 percent male. Overall life expectancy was 70 years: 68.6 years for men, 71.4 years for women. Between 1979 and 2005, the fertility rate decreased from about 7 to 1.8 children born per woman.

Ethnic Groups and Languages: The main ethnic groups in Iran are Persian (60 percent), Azeri (20 percent), Kurdish (7 percent), Lur (3 percent), Arab (2 percent), Baloch (2 percent), Turkmen (2 percent), Turkish tribal groups such as the Qashqai (2 percent), and non-Persian, non-Turkic groups such as Armenians, Assyrians, and Georgians (2 percent). Persian, the official language, is spoken as a mother tongue by 60 percent of the population and as a second language by an additional 15 percent.

Religion: The constitution declares Shia Islam as the official religion of Iran. At least 90 percent of Iranians are Shia Muslims, up to 7 percent are Sunni Muslims, and 2 percent adhere to various other Islamic sects such as the Ahl-e Haqq. Other recognized religions are Christianity, Bahaism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. Individuals of all religions are required to observe Islamic codes on dress and gender segregation in public. Individuals of minority religions are prohibited from serving in senior administrative positions in many government ministries.

Education and Literacy: In 2003 the literacy rate of the population was 79.4 percent. The rate for males was 85.6 percent and the rate for females, 73 percent. Under the constitution, primary education (between ages six and 10) is compulsory. The government reports that 95 percent of children receive primary and secondary education. The majority of Iran's 113,000 pre-collegiate public schools are single-sex above kindergarten. Supervisors must be Muslim, and one hour per week of Islam is a required subject.

ECONOMY

Overview: Iran's economy is dominated by the oil industry, which is part of the state sector. The state also owns and administers several large industries. The private sector includes automobile, textile, metal manufacturing, and food-processing factories as well as thousands of small-scale enterprises such as workshops and farms. Smuggling and other illegal economic activities occupy an increasingly large part of the overall economy. Also occupying an influential place in economic policy making are the traditional import-export merchants, collectively known as the bazaar. Because 80 percent of export earnings come from oil and gas and accrue to the government as revenue, world prices for those commodities have a major impact on Iran's budget.

Labor: In 2005 an estimated 14 percent of Iran's labor force of 23.7 million were unemployed; the unemployment rate was much higher among younger workers, and underemployment was common. Skilled labor has been in short supply. In 2001 some 45 percent of the labor force was employed in services, 30 percent in agriculture, and 20 percent in industry. In 2005 the minimum wage was about US\$120 per month, provoking substantial labor unrest in 2005.

Foreign Economic Relations: Since 1996 the United States has maintained the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which is a full trade and financial transactions embargo against Iran, although the embargo was relaxed in 2000 to permit the U.S. to import Iranian carpets,

caviar, and pistachio nuts. In the early 2000s, China emerged as an important trade partner both in imports and exports. The main commodities imported are basic manufactures, chemicals, food (chiefly rice and wheat), and machinery and transport equipment. The main commodities exported are petroleum, carpets, chemical products, fruit and nuts, iron and steel, natural gas, and copper.

Currency and Exchange Rate: The value of the rial, Iran's unit of currency, declined substantially between 2002 and 2005. In 2002 a multiple exchange rate was replaced by a single floating rate. In late March 2006, the exchange rate was approximately 9,140 rials to the U.S. dollar. The tuman, which is worth 10 rials, is the preferred unit of currency in commerce.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Telecommunications: Most phases of telecommunications services are controlled by the state Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI). Between 1995 and 2003, the number of telephone land lines increased from 86 to 146 per 1,000 population. In 2003 the ratio of telephone subscribers was 271 per 1,000 population. In 2005 an estimated 10 percent of Iran's population (68 million) had mobile telephone service through one mobile network, which was heavily congested and had a long waiting list. Internet use expanded rapidly in the early 2000s, from an estimated 250,000 users in 1999 to an estimated 7 million users in 2004. The Telecommunications Company of Iran estimated that Iran will have 25 million Internet users by 2009. In 2005 some 12 major certified Internet service providers (ISPs) were in operation. However, the state filtered Internet content intensively.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Political System: Following the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79, a national referendum approved a new constitution, for which several amendments were approved in 1989. According to that constitution, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a republic with a nominal separation of powers among the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. The senior figure in the system is the faqih, an expert in religious law, who also has the title Leader of the Revolution. The constitution named Ayatollah Khomeini as the first faqih by virtue of his role as leader of the 1978–79 Revolution. Faqihs are elected by a majority vote of the Assembly of Experts, a body of senior clergymen who are elected in national elections. The legal system is based on sharia (Islamic law).

Executive Branch: Among the responsibilities of the faqih are choosing the commanders of the military services and the head of the judiciary; setting general state policy; declaring war and peace; commanding the armed forces (including control of intelligence and security agencies); initiating and supervising amendments to the constitution; and supervising a variety of influential parastatal foundations and organizations. The executive branch is headed by the president, who in practice is the second-highest government official. He is elected in national elections every four years and is limited to two consecutive terms. The constitution specifies that the president must be a Shia Muslim. The current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected in 2005.

Judicial and Legal System: Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, in practice the judicial branch is influenced strongly by political and religious institutions. Defendants have the right to public trial, choice of a lawyer, and appeal. Judicial authority is concentrated in the judge, who also acts as prosecutor and investigator to the exclusion of legal counsel. The Special Clerical Court, which is outside the court system and overseen directly by the faqih, deals with crimes committed by members of the clergy, including "ideological offenses." Such offenses include interpretations of religious dogma

that are not acceptable to the establishment clergy and activities, such as journalism, outside the realm of religion.

Politics and Political Parties: Official political activity is permitted only to groups that accept the principle of political rule known as *velayat-e faqih*, literally, the guardianship of the *faqih* (religious jurist). Political parties were legalized in 1998, and at least 25 were present in the sixth Majlis (2000–2004).

Mass Media: The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, provided that published material complies with Islamic principles. Freedom of speech is not guaranteed. In 1997 and 1998, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance relaxed regulations for publishing licenses and issued several hundred licenses, which led to the emergence of scores of new newspapers and journals, most of which promoted reformist causes. Reformist publications continue to express views on many contentious issues. The state news service is the Islamic Republic News Agency, which publishes the English-language “Iran Daily.” Radio and television broadcasting is controlled by the state’s Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting company. In 2002 an estimated 13 million radios and 7 million television sets were in use. An estimated 1 million satellite dishes are in use to receive international broadcasts, although they are forbidden and jamming has occurred. In 2003 the government assigned a commission to monitor Internet news sites.

Foreign Relations: The election of Khatami in 1997 led to improved relations with Iran’s neighbors and with most of the West, excluding Israel and the United States. The Khatami government (in power 1997–2005) stressed commercial and geopolitical relations with Western Europe and Japan, which have opposed the U.S. Iran-Libya Sanctions Act banning major investment by third countries in Iran’s energy resources. Foreign relations have been an area of consensus among conservatives and reformers since the late 1980s. In 2004 and 2005, relations with the U.S. deteriorated because U.S. officials believe that Iran intends to develop a nuclear weapons program. The Bush administration also expressed concern that Iran might be supporting insurgents against U.S. forces in Iraq and Palestinian groups opposed to the peace process in Israel. Relations with Europe also declined because of Iran’s insistence on processing nuclear fuel for its nuclear energy plant. In early 2006, the European Union (EU) supported a U.S. demand that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council if the nuclear fuel enrichment program continues.

Since the overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has established cooperative relations with the interim government. In the early 2000s, relations with other regional Arab countries have varied from correct or relatively good (e.g., with Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates) to relatively strained (e.g., with Algeria and Egypt). Iran also has had relatively good relations with China, India, and Russia, particularly in the area of military cooperation. Relations with neighbors Pakistan and Turkey have been correct but not close; in 2006 a major gas pipeline deal had the potential to improve relations with Pakistan.

Human Rights: International human rights organizations have cited major abuses in Iran’s judicial system. Violations listed include arbitrary arrest, lack of due process, denial of access to attorneys, restrictions on family visits, prolonged periods in solitary confinement, and inhumane punishments in unofficial detention centers. Prison conditions are poor, particularly regarding food and medical care. The government has acknowledged its policy of incarcerating political enemies. The paramilitary Basij sometimes monitor behavior in public spaces and are authorized to detain individuals deemed in violation of dress codes. After a period of liberalization in the first regime of President Khatami (1997–2001), in the early 2000s government control of the media grew noticeably more stringent. The

government controls all television and radio broadcast facilities. Domestic and foreign publications and films are censored. The State also filters Internet content.

Members of religions not specifically protected by the constitution (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism) do not have full rights to assemble.

The Family Protection Law of 1967, which had extended some rights to women, was repealed after the 1978–79 Revolution. Marriage law discriminates against women in divorce, child custody, and inheriting from deceased spouses. In theory, a man may have as many as four wives at one time, provided he has the written consent of his wives; temporary marriages also are permitted, although they do not provide women with the same legal rights as permanent marriages. Court testimony by a woman is regarded as worth one-half that of a man. Although women have equal access to education, social and legal conditions limit their professional activities.

Source: The Library of Congress

www.loc.gov

Discussion Questions for “Letters From Iran”

1. In the film, the director talks about the paradox between his native country of Iran and his life in America. Ask students to discuss the paradox between the cultures of their own backgrounds and that of the United States. How do they resemble each other and how are they different?
2. The role of women in Iran is discussed in the film as it relates to the director’s wife, an accomplished artist who cannot show her work because of its subject matter and the director’s daughter who chooses to return to America to continue her education. If faced with similar decisions, how would students choose? What are the opportunities for women living in modern Iran today? Have students research the topic and report back to the class.
3. The director talks about the growing consumerism evident in Tehran with billboards and shops promoting Western goods. How are Islamic countries handling their people’s desire for these goods while balancing the cultural and religious customs as well?
4. The film references the Revolution several times as a turning point for the country. Is the Revolution, especially among young Iranians, an important event for them? Or are the current political developments, especially with the recent election of President Ahmadinejad more relevant? Have students research both events and report back to the class.
5. Recent reports indicate that open criticism of the Iranian government by Iranians is becoming harder, with many being arrested. Due to recent events, many in the United States feel that free speech is also being limited in this country. Explore the similarities and differences of free speech laws in both countries.
6. When asked why he chose to return to Iran, the director does not give a clear answer, only referencing his need to be with his culture and family. Ask students if they were faced with a similar decision, would they choose to stay or return. Have them list the pros and cons of each choice.
7. Many see the Iranian government’s growing expression for an increased presence on the world stage, especially in energy and military matters, an indicator for how other Islamic nations may act in the future. Have students research how other Islamic countries perceive Iran and compare that recent U.S. and Europe statements on Iran. How do they differ? How are they similar?