

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
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IRANIAN HISTORY
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INTRODUCTION

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IRAN is a nation-state that until the early twentieth century was known to the world as Persia. In the West, the name Persia often invokes images of a world imbued with mystery, decadence, and luxury, images that persist from the time of classical Greek authors to that of the Victorian travelers. Persian carpets, Persian cats, and Iranian caviar, among other commodities, are images associated with Persians and Iran. Today, Iran is viewed as the paragon of defiance against the West and imperialism and as the defender of the Muslim world and the Palestinians in the face of threats and sanctions. But these are only glimpses of a civilization with a long and complicated history that has captivated and perplexed ancient and modern observers alike. It is for this reason that a history of Iran is of interest and value for the English-speaking world.

According to the Christian tradition, three Zoroastrian magi, the priests of the ancient Persian religion, followed the stars to find Jesus in Bethlehem, far away from their fire-temples. The magi, with their fire-temples and their art of seeing into the unknown, were described by writers from Herodotus to Marco Polo. The establishment of the largest empire in antiquity, one of the most benevolent of any in world history, if any empire is good, is associated with the Persians. Its founder, Cyrus the Great, changed the map of the world and brought the Afro-Asiatic world together for the first time in history. His successors created the first world-scale political system, bringing the three ancient hydraulic systems, the civilizations of the Indus, the Nile, and Mesopotamia, into one orbit. Cyrus the Great's own testament, the Cyrus Cylinder, is special among the records of world conquerors, proclaiming peace and justice among the different ethnic and religious communities under his firm rule. That is why he is remembered so fondly in the Old Testament as the "anointed" one by no less than God himself, and why Xenophon chose him as the subject of the first biography in Greek.

Art and ideas brought by the Iranians to the ancient world spread from the Islamic world to the Christian West. During late antiquity, Iranians introduced their favorite sport, polo, to the world. This game of the nobility, along with the board game backgammon, was a means of education and physical preparation for Iranians in antiquity. Other cultural products included chess, its rules changed by the Iranians to make it as it is currently played, and one of the earliest visual attestations of jousting, from the third century CE. The gilded dishes from late antique Iran demonstrate the favorite activities of the court and nobility, especially the ruler, who in the Iranian world was called the “King of Kings” (Middle Persian *shāhān shāh*). These activities were in a sense the culmination of Persian *paideia*, or, as it is known in Persian, *farhang* (“culture”). Thus, an Iranian had to be sound and balanced in both mind and body in order to be considered a cultured and complete individual. Once he acquired these arts, to use a term from the later Islamic Sufi tradition, he had become a “perfected human” (in Persian, *ensān-e kāmēl*).

Politically, Iranians were viewed with awe and fear throughout the ancient world, mainly due to the fact that the Greek city-states fought for independence from the Persians as well as one another. Persians, as the Greeks knew them then, were ruled by a king who represented the epitome of absolute monarchy. These kings lived in fabulous palaces, ate sumptuously, ruled over innumerable armies, and controlled half of the world. The ancient Iranians, from Cyrus the Great to Xerxes, were known and remembered in ancient literature for different reasons. Whereas Xerxes was vilified for his attempt to conquer Hellas, Xenophon made Cyrus the subject of the first Greek biography, the *Cyropaedia* or “Education of Cyrus.” In a sense, Cyrus the Great became that emulated *ensān-e kāmēl*, that perfect man for the ancients, Greeks and Iranians alike. Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Achaemenid Persian Empire brought initial devastation and then destruction to the famous Iranian capital, Persepolis. But a later consequence was the mingling of Greeks and Iranians in the Hellenistic period. To use the statement of the Achaemenid scholar Pierre Briant, Alexander was only the last of the Achaemenids.

These clashes, remembered and studied, also helped create the idea in post-Renaissance Europe of the conflict of modern West versus the East or the Orient. On one side stands the West with its ancestors, the Greeks, facing the East with its ancestors, the Persians/Iranians. This binary opposition and cultural heritage is more a creation of modern Western tradition than a reality, as Greeks and Iranians interacted with each other much more than the Germans or the English did with the Greeks. In a sense, the Iranians and Greeks are part of the same cultural orbit and are the inheritors of the same cultural milieu. In the medieval period, more Iranians studied, worked, and wrote commentaries on Aristotelian and Platonic texts than did all the scholars in Europe.

In the second century BCE, the Arsacids were responsible for the creation of the Silk Road trade. The Achaemenid Persian Empire had already created a Royal Road 1,600 miles long, connecting the Iranian Plateau to Central Asia and the Mediterranean. In 115 BCE, during the rule of the Arsacids king Mithradates II, the Chinese ambassadors sent by the Emperor Wudi came to his court. They concluded a treaty whereby commodities would pass to and through Iran. Thus Chinese, Iranian, and Roman orbits of power became the main actors in the premodern Eurasian economy, which came into being with the Sino-Iranian treaty.

The Romans, during their imperialistic adventures in the Near East, came face to face with the Iranian Arsacids. In 53 BCE, at the Battle of Carrhae, the Arsacids humiliated the once invincible Roman forces. The Romans were never really able to subdue the Parthian Empire and had to acknowledge its might. They also borrowed Iranian ideas via Armenia in the form of Mithraism. The Mithraic initiation ceremony, with its philosophical and soteriological aspects, had its origins in Zoroastrianism. The Romans adopted and adapted the tradition, and the “Persian religion,” as the Romans called it, became widespread in Europe and the Mediterranean region until Christianity won out in the fifth century CE.

In the third century CE, with the coming of the new Sasanian dynasty to power, Iran became the single most powerful empire in the region. Between 240 and 270 CE, Shapur I brought the Roman Empire to its knees by capturing one Roman emperor, killing another, and making a third a tributary. Shapur II in the fourth century CE repeated the victories of a century before; he defeated the Romans and caused the death of their general/emperor, Julian the Apostate. In the sixth and seventh centuries CE, two kings named Khosrow ruled over one of the most opulent empires and one of the largest cities, Ctesiphon, in late antiquity. We can understand the Iranian mentality and worldview through a story about the Persian king and his throne room. The Iranians had placed three ceremonial thrones in their palace at Ctesiphon, for the Roman, Turkic, and Chinese rulers. The Persian king sat on a larger throne as a symbolic gesture of his superiority. It is the wars of King Khosrow II and Emperor Heraclius that ushered in the decline of the Byzantine and the fall of the Sasanian Empire and thus the end of antiquity. The Muslims were then able to easily sweep through Southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean to face and then decimate the two superpowers of late antiquity. It is noteworthy that Iranians themselves, particularly their cavalry, joined the conquerors and were responsible for Islam’s victory in the Afro-Asiatic world in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. With this event, the world of ancient Iran changed deeply in political, social, and religious ways, and Iran thus became part of the larger Muslim domain.

The word *Iran* and the idea it represents originally came from the mythical homeland of the Aryans. In the sacred text of the Zoroastrians, the *Avesta*, specifically the hymns dedicated to Yazatas, or those worthy of having sacrifices made to them, we find heroes and kings offering sacrifices so they can rule over what is known as the “Expanse of the Aryans.” In the Avestan language, the place is known as *Aryana Vaējah*, which by the Sasanian period came to be called *Iran-Vej* in Middle Persian. In the *Avesta*, we also come across the geographical designation of *Airyanam Dahyunam*, “Aryan (or Iranian) lands,” which appear to have been the eastern part of the greater Iranian world, what is today Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. In late antiquity we first encounter another term, *Ērānshahr*, now associated specifically with the plateau. *Ērānshahr* meant “the Land of the Iranians,” and finally, by the sixth and seventh centuries, the truncated form, *Ērān* (Iran), is identified with the Sasanian Empire. This means that the Sasanians used the traditions of their ancient religion to name the territory that they were dominating. Not only was Iran set with a boundary and defensive walls at its four corners, but cultural mores and values became associated with the idea of being Iranian. In Middle Persian literature, we

encounter the idea of people having an “Iranian disposition” and an “Iranian attitude” that was initially shaped by Zoroastrianism. But by the sixth and seventh centuries CE, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians alike identified with Iran and being Iranian.

With the Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE, Iran became part of a larger realm, that of *Dar al-Islam*. Two centuries later, Islam as a religion and culture had become an important characteristic of much of the population on the Iranian Plateau. It is important to note that Iranians themselves were the chief contributors to the cultural development of Islam outside of the Arabian peninsula, even though there are Persian words in the Qur’an that suggest an influence within Arabia as well. The Iranians were able to spread Islam as a religion and culture in a manner that surpassed its initial message, a fact that has captured the imagination of the non-Muslim world. To use Marshall G. S. Hodgson’s terminology, the Perso-Islamic world still demonstrated its Iranian values and ideas, much of it from its encounter with the Arabs and much from its own cultural past. By the eleventh century, the Persian language emerged as the main vehicle for the spread of Islam in the East. As evidence, one can point out that one of the most important Persian books to be composed in rhyme in the eleventh century came not from the province of Fars in southwestern Iran, but rather from the province of Khorasan in the northeast. The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi has been considered a masterpiece of the Persian language for the past thousand years. The *Shahnameh*, or *Book of Kings*, retells the stories of ancient Iranian kings and the beliefs, ideals, and values of the Iranians. Copyists and storytellers made sure that the *Book of Kings* survived and in many ways became the badge of identity for the Iranians. The early independent dynasties of Iran in between the tenth and thirteenth centuries CE, namely the Samanids, Buyids, Ghaznavids, and Seljuks, regardless of whether they were Turkish, Arab, or Persian, promoted the book, learned from it, and practiced its lessons.

By the ninth century, Iran was nominally under the rule of the caliph, but in effect was broken up into kingdoms ruled by local Persian, and then Turkish, overlords. The new immigrants from the steppes, the Turks, first entered as soldiers and slaves, but eventually became the shahs and sultans of Iran. The Iranian-speaking Buyids and Samanids gave way to Turkish Ghaznavids, Seljuks, and Khwarazmshahs from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Still, the Iranian language and Iranian values and identity were so strong that the newcomers were fully absorbed into them and adopted the idea of being Iranian. In fact, Persian culture and humanism came hand in hand to produce a new age of learning for the Middle East and the world.

Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the Iranian world reached its zenith in science, philosophy, poetry, and humanism. Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarazmi in eastern Iran brought forth the idea of algebra and decimal points. The word *algorithm* itself in fact derives from the name al-Khwarazmi. Zakariya Razi (Latin *Alrhazes*), born in the late ninth century in Ray, close to modern Tehran, became known as one of the most important physicians of his time. He established hospitals and correctly diagnosed diseases such as smallpox and measles, as well as distilling

and “discovering” medical alcohol. In the tenth century, Abu Nasr Farabi wrote the single most important text on the theory of music and was known in the West as one of the greatest philosophers of the East and the major commentator on Aristotle.

In the eleventh century, the polymath Abu Rayhan Biruni, who took an interest in every scientific field, including geography and history, lived in greater Khorasan. In the twelfth century, Omar Khayyam, who came from the same region as Biruni, wrote the most important mathematical treatise in the Islamic world on algebra. Khayyam was also a philosopher and in a way an agnostic, or, as some have claimed, an atheist. This fact becomes evident in his poetry, which in the Persianate world did not receive due attention. It was the British savant Edward FitzGerald in the nineteenth century who made Khayyam’s poetry renowned in the West and established his status as one of the great poets of the Islamic world. In the past century, though, Khayyam has also become respected in this regard in Iran. He was the main conduit for the transfer of Indian science to the West, through his own work and commentaries. The thirteenth-century philosopher and astronomer Naser al-Din Tusi is noted for his scientific ability and the establishment of an important observatory at Maragheh. These were some of the important thinkers who made medieval Iran the locus of a golden age of science and humanism, an age unmatched until modern times.

While nomadic invasion from the southeast had ended the pre-Muslim era, the nomadic invasion from the steppes in the northeast also brought new conquerors. The Mongols brought about a new phase in Iran’s social, economic, and political history. In addition to the earlier sedentary, agricultural economy, the pastoral way of life took hold in Iran. A steady deforestation and devastation of the land, along with the loss of libraries and the death of scholars and men of letters, drove the Iranian realm into a state of underdevelopment from which it was really never able to recover. The Mongol conquest from the east devastated such cities as Samarkand and Bukhara, places of learning and culture for the Iranians. The initial massacres and destruction were reported by those who lived to tell of the apocalyptic scale of devastation. In time, however, the Mongol khans along with their armies became Muslims, adopted the Persian language, and brought forth an age of cultural efflorescence under the Ilkhanids and the Timurids between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries CE. Persian miniatures and the Persian language were the two best-known products of this period. Such fabulous structures as the mausoleum of Oljitu Khodabandeh at Sultaniyeh are a testament to the domed architecture of medieval Iran.

The flourishing of the Persian language in this period is of particular importance for the culture of medieval Iran, as this is the period when some of Iran’s most important literary figures appeared. Some of these figures lived on the Iranian Plateau, and others traversed and lived in other parts of the Islamic world. Sa’di lived in Shiraz during the thirteenth century, at one of the most difficult times in the history of Iran and Asia, the Mongol onslaught that devastated the Middle East and the Iranian world. Amid this havoc, Sa’di produced his important works, such as the

Bustan and *Golestan*, which present strong moral and social traditions and wisdom at a time of trouble. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century, an Iranian who claimed to be learned would have to have studied the works of Sa‘di. In the thirteenth century, another Persian poet, Mowlana Jalal al-din Balkhi, known in the West as Rumi, became the mystic poet par excellence of the Persian language, the Muslim world, and today of the West. Hafez lived in the fourteenth century CE in the city of Shiraz. He never left his city, but Iranians and Persian speakers from all around the world still visit his tomb and read his poems about love, mysticism, carnal and metaphysical pleasure, and drunkenness. In the fourteenth century, the Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta could hear Persian being spoken as far away as China, and Persian was the language of the court and administration in India until the nineteenth century, when British colonization ended that tradition. It was via the same avenue that words associated with the “East” in the Western mind also managed to travel far and wide. Images of mystery and the idea of the East, where people are huddled in bazaars or traveling by horse or camel and stopping at caravanserais, are most associated with the medieval Muslim world. In fact, the words *bazaar* (Persian *bāzār* from Pahlavi *wāzār*) and *caravan* (Persian and Pahlavi *kārwān*) are of Persian origin and travelled to Mughal India, where they entered European languages.

In the sixteenth century, Iran as a territory came under the control of a new dynasty that followed the spiritual path of Shaykh Safi al-Din (d. 1334). The Safavids were of Kurdo-Azeri origins. The force of their militant piety changed Iran from a largely Sunni Muslim population with sizable Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian minorities into a Shi‘ite empire, pressed between the Ottoman and Mughal gunpowder empires. In the official correspondence of the Safavids, their realm was called *Iran*. The new capital at Isfahan became one of the wonders of the world, renowned for its beauty, with its bazaar, mosques, and gardens. One can still experience this Safavid cultural renaissance when visiting the city of Isfahan. The Safavids protected Iran at a time when Europeans were attempting to establish their power in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In the eighteenth century, Afghans were able to topple the last Safavid ruler, Shah Sultan Hosein, and bring Safavid rule to an end.

The tide was quickly turned, and Nader Shah Afshar, followed by Karim Khan Zand, restored the independence of Iran under the Afsharid and Zand dynasties in the eighteenth century. Nader Shah even flexed his power in the east and invaded India, effectively ending Mughal power. Karim Khan, in his turn, attempted the creation of a representative system by calling himself “Advocate of the People” and ruling from the city of Shiraz. The tranquility brought by Karim Khan was short-lived, and the country finally fell to the Qajar dynasty, which ruled from 1794 to 1921 and was established by Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar. Iran encountered modernity during the Qajar period, but also lost some of its territories to the Russians. The Qajars, however, managed to strike a balance and kept Iran independent between the British and Russian powers, who aimed to control the country economically and politically. On the other hand, the longest-ruling Qajar king, Naser al-Din Shah along with Amir Kabir, attempted to build the institutions for a modern state at his

capital, Tehran. Travels to Europe and fascination with the modern world began the process of modernization and the transmission of new ideas into the country. From gaslit and then electricity-lit streets to a new bureaucratic apparatus to newspapers, all were introduced to the populace. During these innovations and changes, despotic and monarchic absolutism remained unshaken until the population, led by Shi'i clergy and secular leaders, brought about the Constitutional Revolution in 1906. The king was forced to sign the constitution and a parliament was established, along with elections where people were able to have a say in the decision making. The Iranian constitution was one of the earliest constitutions approved by a people in the Middle East, and it attempted to curtail the powers of the ruler and give voice to the people.

In 1921, an Iranian Cossack officer named Reza Khan came to power through a coup d'état and was crowned the first Pahlavi ruler in 1925. Iran now moved faster toward secularization and modernization, leaving the Shi'i clerical establishment and much of Iran's traditional past behind. The reforms of Naser al-Din Shah became much more pronounced and institutionalized under Reza Shah and his son. The discovery of oil in the early twentieth century propelled Iran into building the country's infrastructure and educating the populace, while also the state changed the calendar system and forcing women to remove their traditional *hejab*.

After Reza Shah was deposed by the British in 1941, his young son, Mohammad Reza Shah, came to the throne. This change created an era of openness in the press, and political participation brought about an important new period in Iran's intellectual and literary history. In 1951, the democratically elected prime minister, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, nationalized the Iranian oil company, and the shah took flight. In response, the British placed a blockade on the country. Another coup d'état took place, this time by the Iranian army, backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which deposed the popularly elected prime minister and brought back the shah. By the 1960s, Iran had an autocratic and repressive regime, silencing any dissident voice through its feared secret service. While a new generation of Iranians was becoming educated and modernized, a large number of Iranians became disgruntled with the cultural polarization of the country and the forsaking of its Islamic tradition and culture. The reforms, such as the emancipation of women, the right to divorce, land reform, breaking the power of the traditional oligarchy, and the secularization of the courts, angered many clerics, including Ayatollah Khomeini, who in 1963 rebuked Muhammad Reza Shah and his increasing dependence on the West and the westernization of Iran.

Increasing evidence suggests that in the last decade of his rule Muhammad Reza was attempting to be less dependent on the United States and the West and more independent, exerting his own power in the region. He was indeed a nationalist, but he had been kept in power through the efforts of the United States and Iran's own secret police and military. Thus the leftists, liberals, and Islamists came together in 1978 to bring down the Pahlavi dynasty. The shah's attempts at appeasing the populace by appointing a more liberal government were too little, too late. He left the country, and in February 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned. In a matter of months, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. This uprising is

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considered the last great revolution of the twentieth century, and it changed the political makeup of the Middle East. In many ways, it was the beginning of Islamic movements, resistance, and conflict against the West in the Muslim world. Iran's and Islam's response to imperialism, outlined a century earlier by Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (in the West known as al-Afghani), had come to fruition.

For the next eight years, through religious and ideological fervor, Iranians lost their aspirations for freedom and democratic values and opted for Islam and a "return" to their Islamic past. Their social rights were severely curbed, many were executed, political dissent was silenced, and the liberals, leftists, and some of the Islamists were arrested. At the same time, a war with Iraq exhausted Iran's resources and capital. The capture of the United States embassy and the war in Lebanon caused major tensions in the region and the world. These conflicts led to Iran's isolation in the international community, especially among the Western countries. Subsequent actions taken by Iranian students and backed by Ayatollah Khomeini brought the demise of the religious, but liberal, prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, and later the escape of the first Iranian president, Abol Hasan Bani Sadr. From then on, the clergy were in power, and their aspiration was the establishment of a religious autocracy throughout the Islamic world. In 1988, when the Iran-Iraq War had come to an end, a large number of political prisoners were executed and Ayatollah Khomeini passed away. From 1989 to 2001, Iran's political posture became less radical, with the exception of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The government began a reconstruction plan that rebuilt Iran's infrastructure and industry and brought water and electricity to villages and small cities. Free universities were established in most cities to educate the large number of youth who were born after the revolution. The government operated based on the motto of "neither Eastern nor Western" and emphasized Iran's independence from world powers.

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami was elected president by a landslide and brought major social changes to the country. In fact, there was a revival of culture in Iran. Films, books, newspapers, and music flourished. Restrictions on women and the stringent dress code were eased; openness, as well as better relations with the West, improved Iran's image and position in the world. Khatami's motto and agenda of "dialogue among civilizations" inspired major changes and new aspirations, especially for the young, who composed more than half of the Iranian population. Still, the supreme leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was archconservative, attempted to slow or completely block these changes. In 1999, university students took to the streets and the first signs of discontent among the second generation of postrevolutionary Iranians revealed themselves. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, who until then had acted as an arbiter between the liberal and conservatives in the government, clamped down on the movement. Unfortunately, the 9/11 bombings in the United States in 2001 hardened the U.S. stance toward the Islamic world. Although Iran was willing to enter into negotiations with the United States, President George W. Bush and his administration ignored the request and pushed on with their war plans in Iraq and Afghanistan, further weakening President

Khatami. Iran was mentioned by Bush as part of the “Axis of Evil,” and with that statement all hopes for reforms in Iran were dashed.

In 2005 the hard-line messianic Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the sixth president of Iran. His populist platform brought major changes in the political landscape of the country. His defiance of the international community, holocaust denial, and pro-Palestinian stance made him popular in the Muslim world. At the same time, he clamped down on the press and the publication of books and attempted to make the country more Islamic in its outlook and behavior. The Revolutionary Guards were given lucrative government contracts and took larger part in the economy and politics of Iran.

The contested election of 2009 seems to have started a new chapter in modern Iranian political struggle. The protest that ensued have further the aspiration of the 1906 and 1979 revolutions and are expressed by a new generation that does not only seek a nominal representation but true freedom from political and social norm.

The sixteen chapters in this book provide a comprehensive study of the Iranian world (Oxus to Euphrates) and its history, going beyond the borders of the modern nation-state. Boundaries of states and empires fluctuate throughout history, but their cultural values resonate and remain where they flourished for centuries. These essays not only elucidate the basic political and social history of Iran but also demonstrate its resonance in the larger Iranian cultural world (what I call *Ērānshāhr*/ *Iranshahr*), which includes Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf states. The Iranian identity, which was formed through a long historical process, also appears beyond the modern territory of the state of Iran. Not only do Tajiks and some Afghans may claim to be Iranians, but Iranians look at the Central Asian world as a place where Iranian culture and the Persian language formed and developed. Indeed, there is a sense of cultural unity that connects these people, regardless of the political and linguistic changes that have taken place in modern times.

I hope that this book demonstrates that Iran and Iranians have had a complex history, formed gradually throughout different periods. To understand Iranian history and the Iranian people, one needs to study these developments and the elements of continuity and change. For Iranians, the past very much influences their interactions and social and political conduct today. The Achaemenid Empire, the Sasanians, the Arab Muslim and Mongol conquests, and the British, Russian, and American hegemony all have left an indelible mark on the psyche of Iranians. Without knowing their history, one will not be able to understand the Iranians, who, like many other peoples, hold their history to be a sacred and guiding light.

Ever since the seventeenth-century rise of European interest in Orientalism, the study of Iran—or, as it was known then, Persia—has been one of the passions of scholar-gentlemen. Ancient Greek and Roman accounts, coupled with those of European explorers and travelers who were guided and haunted by the earlier accounts, made Iran a destination of scholarly interest. Russian, British, French, and German colonial and political interests and power over Iran made its study an imperative, as lands that had been influenced by Iranian culture or had been

part of its various polities were now in European hands. For example, the official language of India, which had been Persian until the late eighteenth century, was changed to English. In the eighteenth century, Afghanistan finally left the orbit of Iranian political control. In the nineteenth century, the Caucasus—which includes the modern states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—was seized by the Russians, and in the twentieth century, Bahrain gained its independence from Iran. In a sense, the study of Iranian culture was brought about by European interest in these areas and Iran itself. In the modern period, interest in Iran grew steadily, especially after the discovery of oil in Iran made it an important regional power. With the creation of a modern state and the promotion of the study of Iran by the Pahlavi dynasty, scholars became more interested in the country as one of the non-Arab states in the Middle East.

With the 1979 revolution in Iran, there was a radical turn away from secularism to an Islamic state and a reaction to the long period of political and economic control by Europeans and Americans. Iran's insistence on its independence from foreign control and on flexing its muscles in the region increasingly made it interesting to the academic community. Its status as a unique theocratic state in the modern world, but at the same time one of the few nations in the Middle East with some form of representative government, was another reason for the renewed interest in Iran. The government and its domestic policies, its tough rhetoric with Israel, the issue of nuclear power—all these peculiarities have made Iran an important country to study. To understand why and how these events took place or are taking place, one needs to know Iran's history and traditions. Otherwise, Iran remains an elusive and incomprehensible place, of interest only to popular news channels and commentators who have not bothered to learn its history.

Author Query

AQ1: Did Iran and Islam have separate responses, or where they one and the same?