

Everything to Know About...

PERSIA

PERSIA is the traditional and historical name of the region known today as modern-day IRAN. Since ancient times, Persia has remained a powerful political and cultural force in the world — especially Asia and the region of the Middle East. A major Muslim region since the 7th century, Iran has held true to the Islamic faith for centuries. Modern-day Iran is a unique blend of traditional and modern values, though it remains staunchly controlled by theocratic (and autocratic) forces.



Pre-Islamic Persia

EARLY PERSIA (2000–700 BCE)

The Persian people were originally cattle-herders from Central Asia. Like many other groups, they were **INDO-EUROPEAN** people (setting them apart from the “Semitic” Arabic peoples to their west). Fierce and nomadic warriors, these early people left Central Asia to establish themselves in modern-day Iran by about **2000 BCE**.

MEDIAN EMP. (678–549 BCE)

Through much of history, the Persians grew up alongside the **MEDES**, another Indo-European group to their north. By 678 BCE, the Medes had established a major empire. In their day, they were considered to be one of the four great powers of the Ancient Middle East (Alongside the **LYDIANS**, the **EGYPTIANS**, and the **CHALDEANS** — or Neo-Babylonians).

Major World Religion: ZOROASTRIANISM



Founded some time before the 6th century and based on the teachings of **ZARATHUSTRA** (or **ZOROASTER**), Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of pre-Islamic Persia. Known to be the first **MONOTHEISTIC FAITH** (other than Judaism), Zoroastrians believe in a single, powerful deity known as **AHURA MAZDA**. Ahura Mazda is the creator of all that is good and worthy to be worshipped, representing light, truth, and justice. At the same time, though, Zoroastrianism is largely **DUALISTIC**, meaning that despite the belief in only one God there is also a major force of evil. This force of evil is embodied in **Aura Mainyu**, the spirit of evil. After allegedly being taken into heaven, Ahura Mazda charged Zoroaster with the task of telling the world of this great conflict and requiring them to take the side of either truth and light or lies and darkness. Many of Zoroaster's original ideas — namely the idea of dualistic conflict, **HEAVEN** and **HELL**, **RESURRECTION**, **FREE WILL** and **ESCATOLOGY** (belief in the end of the world) — would be passed on to Christianity and Islam.

ACHAEMENID DYNASTY (550–336 BCE)

The most magnificent of the pre-Islamic Persian dynasties, the Achaemenid Dynasty was also the first. Founded around 550 BCE by **CYRUS II** (“The Great”), the Persians quickly conquered the Medes to the North, the Chaldeans in Mesopotamia and Lydians in Asia Minor. Cyrus's son and successor, **CAMBYSES**, would take control of Egypt as well, and other great leaders such as **DARIUS I** and **XERXES I** will continue to expand the Empire's borders. At its height, the empire would control more than 40% of the world's total population at that time (thus making it the largest empire in history in terms of percentage of population). Through the efforts of Cyrus and Darius, the empire will become increasingly centralized (united under the **KING OF KINGS**, or **SHAH**). Darius and Xerxes will begin a long and ultimately unsuccessful war with the Hellenes (Greeks) remembered by Western scholars as the **PERSIAN WARS**. Despite the wealth and size of the empire (which will exceed even **ANCIENT ROME**) the Achaemenids — under **DARIUS III** — will be conquered by **ALEXANDER'S HELLENISTIC EMPIRE** in 336 BCE.

Cyrus II “The Great” r. 559–530 BCE

Founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty. Well-remembered for his religious and cultural tolerance. Allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem (as they had been exiled into Babylon by the Chaldeans [Neo-Babylonians]). This act earned him the honor of being the only Gentile (non-Jew) to be called “**MESSIAH**.” Organized and centralized the Achaemenid government while building the empire into a massive power.

Darius I “The Great” r. 522–486 BCE

Takes over Persia after a brief conflict of succession following Cyrus's death. Known as a great organizer, building up the empire's infrastructure. Divides the empire into **SATRAPIES** and establishes the **ROYAL ROAD** to improve trade and communication. Beginning in 499, several revolts erupt in the Greek-populated regions of Ionia and Lydia. Darius decides to march on Greece, leading to the **PERSIAN WARS** and the failed **BATTLE OF MARATHON** (490 BCE).

Satrapies and Satrapies

Beginning under Darius I, the Persian Empire was divided into numerous administrative regions known as **SATRAPIES**. Each satrapy was governed by a **SATRAP**, who governed on behalf of the King of Kings. Though satraps were largely autonomous, they were kept loyal by wandering agents known as **THE EYES AND EARS OF THE KING**. This system would be replicated by numerous later empires.

The Royal Road

Also under Darius I, the **ROYAL ROAD** ran from Asia Minor (Turkey) to Persia with posts established every 14–18 miles for food, supplies, and fresh horses. Allowed for rapid communication and trade.

Qanats

Tapping into underground sources, the Persians were able to access immense sources of water by building **QANATS**. Qanat technology could also be used to create an early form of refrigeration.

AFTER ALEXANDER

PERSIA is temporarily conquered by **ALEXANDER THE GREAT**, beginning after the **BATTLE OF GAUGAMELA** in 331 BCE. During this time, the empire will become increasingly **COSMOPOLITAN** under the influences of **HELLENISM**. With the death of Alexander in 323, Persia falls under the control of the **SELEUCIDS** — the lands under one of Alexander's former generals, **SELEUCUS**. The Seleucids will continue to rule the region until it is retaken by the **PARTHIAN** people to the north of Persia.



PARTHIAN DYNASTY (247 BCE–224 CE)

After pushing out the Seleucids from the region, the northern **PARTHIAN** people came to dominate Persia for nearly 500 years. Following in the Hellenistic footsteps of Alexander, the Parthian culture is a blend of Achaemenid and Greek ideas and methods. Persia was significantly de-centralized during this period, with increasing power going to the nobles and family clans. Persia's military during this term shifted almost exclusively to cavalry units. Situated along the **SILK ROAD**, the Parthians benefitted from being the “middle-man” between east and west. Famous for their brutal rivalry with Ancient Rome, who failed to ever conquer the region (despite several attempts) in any substantial way. Religion was increasingly unstable, despite **ZOROASTRIAN** influences.

SASSANID DYNASTY (224 – 651 CE)

The third and final of the pre-Islamic dynasties, the Sassanid Empire was founded in 224 CE and lasted until 651 CE. Continually marked by a bitter rivalry between Rome (and then the Byzantines once Rome fell). United the region under an increasingly-radical form of Zoroastrianism established to be a stronghold against **CHRISTIANITY** (which was seen as too “Roman”). Generally seen as a Renaissance of traditional Persian ideas (namely art and architecture) and would continue to gain wealth by acting as middle-man on the Silk Road. Despite their powerful military, the Sassanids began to decline versus the Byzantines — being staunchly defeated by the Byzantine emperor **HERACLIUS** in the early 600's. While this did not topple the Sassanids, it left them wide open for Muslim invasion in the following century.

The **SASSANIDS** are toppled by the forces of the **CALIPHATE** in 651 CE, marking the end of the so-called “Pre-Islamic” era of Persian history. For the remainder of history, Persia (and later Iran) will be a decidedly Islamic region (eventually favoring Shia Islam).



ISLAMIC Persia

THE ISLAMIC CALIPHATE

The forces of the **CALIPHATE** will topple the Sassanids in 651 CE, pulling the empire under control of the Caliphs and converting the religion to **ISLAM**. The Muslim empires will benefit heavily from the infrastructure left behind by the Persians. Many of the ideas of Persian culture — such as art, architecture, and the sciences — will be expanded (and Islamized) by these empires — leading to a flourishing of culture. Persia will once again become a center of science and learning. Increased Islamization will lead to the decline of Zoroastrianism. Many Zoroastrians will flee to India (where religious tolerance is far more prevalent). Persia will be a major part of the **UMAYYAD**, **ABBASSID**, and **SELJUK** dynasties, and will even gain independence at various times (though never for very long).

Like many eastern regions, Persia will fall under the control of the **MONGOLS** beginning in 1219. The Mongols ruled the region for some time, but devastated the region in the invasion process. The **BLACK DEATH** of the mid-14th century wiped out around 30% of the region's population. Control of Iran splintered until the arrival of **TAMERLANE** — leader of the **TIMURIDS** — who temporarily united the region. Various small factions appeared when the Timurids collapsed, but many were united by an increase in **SUNNI** Muslim ideology (which would severely change under the Safavids).

SAFAVID DYNASTY (1501-1736 CE)

By the early 1500's, Persia begins to take shape once more (driven by ideas such as **SUFISM**, a branch of Islam). In 1501, Shah Ismail I — a skilled conqueror — finally united the region under the **SAFAVID DYNASTY**. The Safavid Empire is known as one of the three great **GUN-POWDER EMPIRES**, referring to the technologies used to expand their borders. Ismail and future Safavids will press for the ideas of **SHIA** Islam. Though unpopular at first, it will eventually gain popular support (though it will place the Safavids at odds with the **OTTOMANS** and **MUGHALS**). The empire's greatest ruler, Shah Abbas, came to power in 1587. Abbas built palaces, parks, and mosques, expanded Persia's borders, and allied himself with England (offering them a port at **HORMUZ**). A time of prosperity erupted during Abbas's rule, with Persian becoming the language of trade and diplomacy and Persian culture spreading around the Eastern world.

ASFARID DYNASTY (1736-1796 CE)

After the decline of the Safavids, the region was recovered by the **ASFARID DYNASTY**. Its greatest leader was **NADER SHAH**, remembered as the "Second Alexander" or the "Napoleon of Persia" for his expansive conquests. Nader is known for expanding the empire to the greatest extent since the Achaemenids and is remembered as a military genius.

QAJAR DYNASTY (1796-1925 CE)

The **QAJAR DYNASTY** will seize the throne in 1796 and establish a dynasty that will last until 1925. The Qajar Dynasty would also move the capital of Persia to **TEHRAN**, where Iran's capital is today.

In the late 1800's, Persia became increasingly pressured by **RUSSIA** to the north and **BRITAIN** (Based in **HORMUZ**) to the south. The shahs attempted to maintain neutrality by offering trading privileges to both powers. The move angered nationalists, who demanded the shah establish a new **CONSTITUTION** in 1906. Before it could take effect, Britain and Russia simultaneously invaded the region, splitting the area into **SPHERES OF INFLUENCE**. Britain, though, would ultimately concede much of its portion to Russia, leading to Russian political and economic control in most of the country (though the oil-rich south continued to be dominated by Britain). The frequent tension between Russia and Britain over the region — as well as much of central Asia — was often remembered as the "**GREAT GAME**" throughout the 19th century. Russia would lose control of their portion in 1917. Britain remained, attempting to bribe the Persian government into placing British advisors into every level of government. Furious, nationalist movements rose up to oppose British occupation. Though the British quickly left, it left Persia weak and vulnerable.

PAHLAVI DYNASTY (1925-1979 CE)

In 1925, a military leader — Reza Khan — overthrew the Qajar Dynasty and established himself as shah (taking the name **REZA SHAH** in the process). The **PAHLAVI DYNASTY** thus began, which began a process of freeing Persia from foreign influence. Industrialization, modernization of the military, railroad construction, women's rights, and control and taxation of foreign oil companies became vital elements of the Pahlavi regime. Like **ATATURK** (a personal hero of the shah) Reza Shah began the process of secularizing the country as well. This angered Muslim hardliners, and caused Reza to lose religious support. Attempting to re-establish his rule, Reza Shah became increasingly tyrannical (executed his opponents, took state money for personal use, even supported **ADOLF HITLER**). In 1941 (**WWII**) British and Soviet troops ousted Reza Shah from power and installed his son, **MOHAMMAD REZA** instead. Since 1935 and the rule of Reza Shah, Persia has been called "Iran," meaning the "Land of the Aryans."

IMPORTANT: The Iranian Revolution is unique: Unlike other revolutions, this one is largely anti-modern, conservative, and theocratic (religiously-based)...

The Iranian Revolution

BACKGROUND

Mohammad Reza came to power in 1941, following the end of his father's destructive rule. The oppression of Reza Shah had already left the Iranian people bitter and opposed to the monarchy and regular conflicts ensued between the shah and the democratically-elected Parliament. In 1953, resentment in Iran forced the Shah out of the country, but CIA (US) and M-16 (British) agents invoked a military coup and overthrew the strongly nationalist (though democratically elected) Prime Minister **MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH**. Mossadegh had attempted to **NATIONALIZE** (bring under Iranian control) the vast oil reserves that had previously been controlled by the West. Thus, the shah was returned to power but was instantly declared to be a western "puppet" by his people. The belief that the west was corrupting Iranian culture was a powerful sentiment — especially among those that listened to **RUHOLLA KHOMAINI**, a high-ranking **AYATOLLAH** (cleric) within Iran. Mohammad Reza began to become increasingly oppressive as a result (exiling Khomeini in 1961) but he was strongly backed by both the military and foreign powers. Though the shah maintained a close relationship with the US, his rule became increasingly corrupt and despised.

REVOLUTION

By the late 1970's, support for Khomeini (exiled in France) had reached an all time high, while support for the shah had continued to plummet. Iranian anger against the shah was also strongly targeted at the United States, who had continued to back the shah to ensure a steady supply of oil and a reliable buffer against the **SOVIET UNION**. In **JANUARY 1979**, widespread uprisings (and health concerns) forced the Shah to flee to the United States. In his absence, Khomeini returned to Iran and widespread support. Very quickly, Iran was transformed into an Islamic-based "republic" (or more appropriately, a theocratic dictatorship) with a strong hatred of the west (particularly the United States). In November of 1979, Iranians stormed the US embassy in Tehran, taking 52 Americans hostage. US President **JIMMY CARTER** failed to have the hostages returned in time for the 1980 election, and lost to president **RONALD REAGAN** as a result. The hostages were returned in 1981.

IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980-1988): After the forces of **SADDAM HUSSEIN** of Iraq seized control of a disputed border area, Iran responded with military force, hoping to spread their theocratic revolution to neighboring Iraq. The result was a long and bloody war; Iraq possessed superior weaponry (including chemical and biological weapons), but Iran possessed superior manpower. When both sides began targeting commercial ships in the Persian Gulf, the United States intervened. In 1988, the war ended in a ceasefire.

