

# **Farsinameh – Abridged English version**

*Summary of the Iranians Chronicle from Persepolis to Jamaran*  
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*Source is the book [Farsinameh](#).*

## 1. Ancient Iran

Today's intelligent humans (homo-sapiens) emerged around 200,000 years ago in North East Africa. Fifty thousand years back, a group of them moved into Asia and Europe. When the last **ice-age** ended 10,000 years ago; a group of those migrants created the first world civilization (Sumer) in today's Iraq.

Soon, the Sumerian civilization was flooded by waves of Semitic immigrants (forefathers of today's Jews and Arabs) and at about 5,000 years ago, morphed into the **Akkadian** civilization. The Akkadians in turn were defeated and absorbed into the Assyrian and Babylonian states.

The first Iran-based civilization was created by the people of today's Khuzestan (the Elamites), at 3,000 BC and around the main city of Susa, near today's Shush-e-Daniel. **Elamites** were neither Semite nor Indo-European, but (like the Sumerians) indigenous and unique. Influenced by their neighbours' militancy for 2,000 years; Elamites waged wars against their Mesopotamian rivals, but were finally defeated and decimated by the Assyrians in 640 BC.

The population vacuum left by the annihilation of Elamites was quickly filled by two Indo-European (Aryan) migrant tribes of Medes and Persians. Those nomadic tribes had moved into the Iranian plateau since 1,500 BC, but were relentlessly haunted by the Assyrian warlords. Finally, the **Medes** grew strong enough to establish a central power near today's Hamadan (Ecbatana), and defeated the great Assyrian empire at their own game (610 BC). Consequently, the Persians who had moved into the Elamite lands in today's Fars, became allied vassals to the Mede kings.

Persians and Medes went to war in 550 BC, which resulted in a spectacular victory by Cyrus II (the great) who captured Ecbatana and sent the Mede king (his maternal grandfather) to exile. Cyrus's victory had a lot to do with his brilliant **diplomatic** skills, which could attract most of the Mede nobles and generals to his cause and against the cruel old king. For the next twenty years, Cyrus continued with a string of

incredible military expansions and established the fabled Persian Empire.

## 1.1 The Achaemenids

In 545 BC, Cyrus defeated the Greek city-states of Asia Minor (Lydia), and captured the legendary treasures of their king (Croesus). That defeat effectively crippled the **Greek** civilization in today's Turkey, and led to the looting and destruction of a number of their grand cities and monuments.

Next in 540 BC, Cyrus's army (greatly assisted by local sympathizers) easily defeated the despised Babylonian king and took over the Mesopotamia. Unlike their previous rulers, Cyrus freed the varied Mesopotamian minorities to practice their cultures and religions, which also included the release of **Jews** and assistance for their return to Zion (today's Israel).

Cyrus then focused his attention to expanding the Eastern frontiers of the empire, but was killed during a fierce battle with the nomadic Scythians (530 BC). Cambyses II succeeded his father, and conquered the ancient civilization of **Egypt**, in a brutal campaign. However, unlike his father, the cruel Cambyses was unable to gain the respect of his new subjects or the loyalty of his generals. He was assassinated during the eighth year of his bloody reign, and the multinational Persian Empire fell into numerous rebellions by its subjugated peoples.

After Cambyses, another son of Cyrus (Bardia) came to power, but was challenged by a group of Persian princes led by **Darius**, who successfully overthrew and killed him and his Median followers and Magi. This coup brought a new dynasty to power, who claimed a common ancestry (Achaemenid) with Cyrus.

Unlike Cyrus, who was more interested in conquering new realms and then leaving each nation's organization to the subdued local nobility; Darius created a truly centralized government. He first forcefully crushed all the rebellions in the subject nations and vanquished a dozen of their leaders. Darius then turned each nation into a **Satrapy**

(province), strictly governed by his Persian appointees, who directly reported to the Shah-an-Shah.

To govern that vast empire, which included Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Mede, Phoenician, Armenian, Jewish, Sogdian and Scythian nations; Darius built a network of roads, postal service, common currency, regular army and navy. Although Cyrus is credited with starting the **Persian** domination, Darius was the king who built it into a functioning empire!

Among the rebellious subject nations during Darius's reign, were the Greek cities of Asia Minor (today's Turkey). However, Darius's army suppressed that uprising, and then shipped an expeditionary attack force (20,000 strong) to punish the mainland Greek city-states who had helped their Asian kindred. This ignited the legendary Persian-Greek wars of the antiquity that is most famously remembered by the **Marathon** defeat of the Darius's army.

After 35 years of Darius as Shah-an-Shah, his son Xerxes (Khashayar) became emperor and tried to finish what his father had started, i.e. take over the mainland Greece. **Xerxes** summoned the largest army in the near East history (some 200,000); complete with a contingent of the subjugated Egyptian navy. However, despite initial victories and even the capture and looting of Athens; the Greek city-states who had united since the battle of Marathon, sank the Xerxes navy and decimated the stranded Persian army in 480 BC. Subsequently, the discredited and cruel Xerxes was assassinated in an internal Persian court conspiracy.

For the next 140 years, the Persian Empire continued a fierce rivalry against the Greek city-states, until the latter were captured or united under the domineering **Macedonian** king, Phillip. After the suspicious assassination of Philip, his son Alexander accused the Persian Shah (Darius III) of the murder, and summoned a formidable Balkan force to take revenge, liberate the Asian Greek cities and pillage the riches of Persia.

Unfortunately, by that time, the Achaemenid dynasty had severely deteriorated under the absolute corruption of the absolute rule;

continuously falling into brutal royal murders, court intrigues and state blunders. Hence, **Alexander** the great defeated Darius III and conquered Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia.

However, Alexander's empire lasted for only ten short years; and after his death, it was broken into many small kingdoms under his feuding generals (the Seleucids). **Seleucids** controlled most of Iran for the next 100 years, but their power declined with civil wars and uprisings.

## 1.2 The Parthians

An Eastern Iranian tribe (the Parthians) prevailed upon the Seleucids, from 240 BC onwards; and created the Arsacid dynasty. Finally, the **Arsacid** king Mithridates struck the final blow to the Mesopotamian Seleucids, capturing their prosperous cities and establishing Ctesiphon as his winter capital.

At the same time, the Roman Empire was inflicting mortal wounds on the weakened Greco-Seleucid kingdoms and by capturing the whole of Greece and Asia Minor, became neighbors with the Parthians. **Rome** with 500 years of glorious civilization and militancy, considered the Arsacids as barbarians that had to be brutally suppressed, in order to annex the Mesopotamia to the Roman realm. However, the Parthians established both a formidable cavalry and a strategic alliance with the Greek populace which was fleeing the Roman subjugation.

The most famous Roman-Parthian war occurred in 53 BC, when the mighty Roman Council Crassus led an invasion of Mesopotamia. The Roman army's most formidable force was their infantry (Legion), while the most versatile Parthian contingent was the horse archers with their fabled Parting Shots. At the Battle of Carrhae, **Crassus** was defeated by the Parthian general Surena. Crassus and his son were killed and most of their forces were massacred or captured as slaves. This battle was the worst Roman defeat since Hannibal had decimated their armies, 160 years prior.

Unfortunately, the Parthian nobility were in constant rivalry with one another; and for example their great general **Surena** was killed by the

suspicious king, soon after the Carrhae victory. The unrelenting battle against the Romans also weakened the Arsacid dynasty, preparing Iran for take over by a second Persian dynasty.

### 1.3 The Sassanians

After 100 years of the Macedonian (Seleucid) rule and 400 years of the Parthian (Arsacid) dynasties, the Sassanians revived the Achaemenid Persian Empire and traditions. Sassanians despised the Greek-loving Arsacids and their feudal and decentralized kingdoms. **Ardashir Babakan**, the ambitious Persian governor of Fars rebelled against the weakened Parthian king (Ardavan) and defeated him in 224 CE, capturing Ctesiphon in 226 and crowning himself as the new Shah-an-Shah.

Ardashir's son (**Shahpor**) who came to power in the year 240; even excelled his glorious father in statesmanship and military prowess. He defeated the by then corrupt Rome, and quite incredibly killed or captured three Roman Emperors! Those victories revived the legendary Persian rule from Asia Minor to India and from Arabia to Armenia.

Like Cyrus the great, Shahpor was considerate towards his new subjects and the Roman captives, who were settled in different parts of the empire and were encouraged to build new cities and buildings, based on the more advanced Roman techniques. Shahpor's religious **tolerance** even led to the proliferation of Christianity and Manichaeism in Iran.

Sadly, after Shahpor's death, there was a bloody power struggle among his sons. In 274, the victorious son (Bahram) who had prevailed with the backing of the chief **Zoroastrian** priest (Kartir) executed many Christians and the Persian prophet Mani.

Over the next half century, the preponderance of Zoroastrian priests and the privileged nobility, created a very wealthy upper class (**caste**) and a very disadvantaged populace. Moreover, the institute of monarchy was often shaken through the wars of succession and numerous priestly conspiracies.

Ultimately, in the year 310, there was no living male successor (son, brother or cousin) to the dying Sassanian king. Hence, an **unborn royal** child was crowned in the womb, with his mother as the viceroy. Good fortune was that the child (Shahpor II) was of great aptitude and revived the Persian rule through his long kingship (to 379 CE).

Shahpor II defeated the **Arab** tribes who had captured the Western half of the empire and its capital (Ctesiphon); and was nicknamed Zol-a-Ketaf (binder of arms), by his Arab captives. The great boost provided by Shahpor II lasted for about 100 years, but by then the major foreign threat had moved from West (Romans and Arabs) to East (Mongols and Turks).

The Mongol raids broke the Sassanian army and treasury, and reduced the Persian kings to weak vassals. The loss of manpower and cash caused a decline in agriculture and several years of chronic famines followed. The destitute masses turned to the radicalized poor Zoroastrian priests, who lead by **Mazdak**, advocated the confiscation of land, properties and even harems from the rich priests and the nobility.

The ensuing revolutionary riots caused the king (Ghobad) to relinquish his riches and even free his slaves and concubines. For forty years, the Persian king lived like a hostage to his external (**Mongol**) and internal (Mazdak) challengers. Ghobad, openly showed obedience to his captors, but his son (Khosrau) began to scheme against them!

In 531, Khosrau (Noshirvan) came to power and started with a brutal suppression of Mazdak and his followers. However, despite eliminating thousands of those ancient socialists; **Khosrau** did not return the confiscated lands and riches to the defunct nobility. Instead, he instituted a new class (Dehghan) out of the numerous landowners, who now each had a small local influence. Khosrau then made peace with the Turks and jointly invaded and captured the Mongol territories. During the 40 years of his reign, Noshirvan behaved like a typical ‘benevolent-dictator’, i.e. both brutish and constructive.

Unfortunately, like so many other dictators, Khosrau could not escape the corrupting influence of absolute power and near the end, turned

neurotic and suspicious. He abolished his grand vizier and trusted deputies, and left the succession in the incapable hands of a murderous son. The ensuing decade of mayhem and unrest, led to a major uprising by the prominent **Parthian** tribes of Khorasan. Their leader (Bahram Chobin) toppled the new Sassanian prince (Khosrau II), and for a short time re-established the Arsacid dynasty.

Khosrau II (Parviz) fled to the Byzantine court, which had inherited the Eastern Roman empire after the collapse of the mainland Rome at the hands of the barbaric Anglo-Germanic tribes. Apparently, he even converted to Christianity and married one of the **Byzantine** princesses, to prove his allegiance to the Western way of life. In return the Roman emperor Maurice supported him with army and funds, which enabled Khosrau Parviz to successfully fight the Parthians and revive his kingship, in 591 CE. This led to a decade of Roman-Persian friendship and religious toleration that, unfortunately, ended with an internal Roman conspiracy which toppled Maurice and killed him and his entire family.

Khosrau Parviz saw a great opportunity during the ensuing power struggles in Byzantine; thus attacked and pillaged their Asia Minor, Mesopotamian, Eastern Mediterranean and even Egyptian territories! In reply, the Romans united behind a new emperor (Heracles) who had revenged Maurice's death. Heracles joined forces with the Armenian **Christians** and executed a sneak attack through their territory, towards the Persian capital. The surprise attack on Ctesiphon caused a great deal of mayhem, and the rebellious Sassanian court conspired and assassinated the king, in 628 CE.

The desperate new Persian king signed a hastily and humiliating truce with the Romans, while relinquishing all the territorial gains and paying an exorbitant amount of land and gold in damages! Sadly, that half century of murderous court conspiracies, civil wars and foreign wars, drained both the Sassanian dynasty of blood, and the country of men and resources. Between 628 and 632, five different kings and two queens came to power. The short reigns of those two **queens** were due to the relentless royal bloodletting (brother against brother, father



against son), which again had emptied the court of all the male Sassanians!

At the same time in Arabia, a new prophet (Mohammad) had emerged, and soon the expanding Muslim army filled the power vacuum that was left by the battling and bleeding Roman and Persian empires. The new universal faith of Islam drew upon the strongest Jewish and Christian traditions, to build a spiritually vibrant and fanatically militant powerbase. In 636 CE, the Arab forces broke the resistance of the Sassanian army at **Qadessieh**, which led to the capture and pillage of Ctesiphon; and subsequently the collapse of the Persian Empire.

A relevant reference: [The Persians, by G.R. Garthwaite.](#)

## 2. The Story of Mohammad

As it was customary among the wealthy Arabs of Mecca, the new born Mohammad was given to a Bedouin nanny to breast-feed, in her tribe's campground outside the town. Dashti attributes that separation to the fact that **Mecca** was so filthy and disease-ridden at the time that most kids would have died, if they were kept there at an early age. So the prophet spent his first years among the Bedouin tribes and in the wild and fresh air of the desert.

Mohammad was very young when his father passed away and his custody (based on **Semitic** traditions) went to his grandfather, and upon his death, to his uncle. In the brutish city of Mecca, the orphaned Mohammad was treated roughly by the other kids who were better off, and was constantly reminded of his poverty and loneliness. Nevertheless, he grew up to be a hardworking, honest and thoughtful young man, very employable in the service of the Mecca traders.

Back then, the Roman trade with Far East (mostly India) had been disrupted by the century old Persian-Roman wars. Therefore, some of that **trade** was rechanneled through Yemen, Mecca and Syria. It was a lucrative operation for the Arab warlords who would organize and protect the safe passage of the caravans to the East Roman Empire (Byzantine).

Mohammad worked for nearly a decade in the Roman trade route and became very familiar with both the Christian and the Jewish traditions of the Near East. As an intelligent young man, he absorbed most of the biblical stories, which placed his life in a much more appealing prospective. He found solace in the hardship stories of Job and Moses, but perhaps was most influenced by **Abraham**, a Semitic prophet who recanted his own town and traditions, to build a new Utopia and create a new way of life.

At the age of 40, after 15 years of marriage to a wealthy business woman, Mohammad found some spare time to contemplate his past and future, his beliefs and doubts. Like some other contemporary mystics of

Mecca, he started frequenting the caves outside town, fasting and praying to god for guidance. He finally claimed that an angel of god had spoken to him, and had read him a book (**Koran**) which would put the affairs of all mankind, including the Arabs, Jews, Persians and Christians, in order!

That message was first tried on his wife and close relatives, with partial success. A handful of them accepted that the honest Mohammad was not lying, and that the incredible verses he was reciting were miraculous and could not be the work of a semi-literate man. Soon, the prophet said that god had asked him to openly summon all the people of Mecca to the new faith. But the tough and cynical men of Mecca laughed at Mohammad's call to brotherhood, monotheism and observance of what seemed like the **Jewish** rituals. Even the Jewish rabbis criticized his inadequate knowledge of the biblical traditions and mistakes in reciting their stories as part of a new testament.

The laughter and the criticism made Mohammad upset and angry enough, to start confronting the prominent townspeople with daily repudiation of their barbaric manners. In response, the Mecca nobility boycotted his business, openly disowned him and even encouraged the street kids to ridicule and stone him. Poor and desperate, the prophet then concentrated his message towards the disadvantaged of Mecca, the deprived and the **slaves**. He not only promised them freedom and hope, but also the Abraham god's pledge that 'the meek would inherit the earth'!

When the Mecca upper class was confronted with the spectre of a slave uprising, they killed some of the rebellious poor, confiscated Muslims' properties and banished Mohammad and his followers to the outskirts of the city. Pained and worried that the fickle flame of his calling would die in such hardship, Mohammad sent messengers far and wide. The people of Yathrib (later called the **Medina** or city of prophet) gave him refuge, and became his base to fight the arrogant aristocracy of Mecca.

From his base in Medina, Mohammad encouraged and organized his followers to revenge on the Meccans, who had earlier confiscated their belongings. This started years of **looting** the Mecca caravans that had to

pass near Medina, on route to Syria and back. In reply, the Mecca warlords organized much bigger trade missions that could be guarded more effectively. That in turn encouraged the now militaristically organized Muslims to engage in open combat with the Meccans who were accompanied by large sums of money and goods.

The rich and powerful of Mecca lost their first famed battle (Badr) to the Muslims, because they had grossly underestimated the ragtag party of Mohammad. The true strength of Mohammad's faith was the open-door policy and **merit-based** hierarchy. If you wanted in, well, you were in, without any tribal or racial barriers. And if you were any good, you could get command, without prejudice and bias. In addition, most of the followers 'had nothing to lose but their chains' (as Karl Marx rediscovered centuries later), and had a lot to gain by attacking and defeating the pampered, pompous and disorganized aristocracy.

His first relatively easy victories made Mohammad both jubilant and gracious. He would be forgiving even towards his tormenters (the Mecca rich) and his ridiculers (the Jewish tribes). However, soon the opposition woke up under the leadership of Mohammad's own grandfather tribe (**Ghoraish**), and organized successful campaigns (like Uhud) against the Muslims. Many of Mohammad's family and friends were killed, and he was himself injured.

But neither the bloody defeat of Uhud, nor the subsequent siege of Medina (war of the trench) could break the back of Mohammad's uprising. In the face of diminished loots and proceeds of war, the prophet promised eternal heaven to his battle-wary followers, where 'streams of milk and honey' would quench their thirst and 'flocks of young virgins' would satisfy their desires. At a more practical level, Mohammad resorted to such Persian-Roman war veterans like **Salomon** the Farsi, who taught the latest war techniques to Muslims. The prophet also started a campaign of intimidation against all the Ghoraish allies, including the neighbouring Jewish tribes, starting with the threat of force and concluding with their massacre and total annihilation.

Against the undefeated rich and powerful of Mecca, Mohammad the war-strategist concluded a balanced peace treaty, which among other

things, allowed him and his followers to visit Mecca and its famed cubic temple once a year, during the pilgrimage. The cubic temple of Mecca (**Kaaba**) was a traditional holy site for the idolater Arabs, where each tribe used to keep its god's symbol (idol) for protection, and they would visit it once a year. The annual pilgrimage was supposed to be a time of peace, and the tribesmen were only allowed to enter Mecca without their weapons.

Initially, Mohammad had overlooked the holiness of Mecca and Kaaba for the Arab, in favour of the Jewish holy town of Jerusalem. However, in face of bitter struggles with the neighbouring Jewish tribes, and in order to gain favours with the Arab tribes who worshiped Kaaba, Mohammad changed the Muslim point of prayer! Then next year, the Muslims returned to Mecca for **pilgrimage** and show-of-force, chanting: 'no god but Allah'. However, they did not otherwise force the issue on the Meccans. Allah was one of the chief existing gods in Kaaba, so the message started to sink in.

The simple unifying message of 'no god but Allah' appealed to the disjointed Arab tribes who could finally see a chance for unity and nationhood. The most powerful of them appealed to Mohammad to also accept the legitimacy and holiness of four highly regarded idols in the Kaaba, as a precondition for them to join the Muslims. Upon reflection, Mohammad accepted and uttered verses which praised the four idols of Kaaba as holy and legitimate. However, the next day, he changed heart and recanted that acceptance as the **Satanic Verses**, which apparently the devil had whispered into his ears!

Next year, during the pilgrimage to Mecca, Mohammad summoned 10,000 armed Muslims to converge on the city. He reneged on the peace treaty and gave two options to the Meccans, Islam (submission) or war! However, when the rich and powerful of Mecca submitted, Mohammad was again gracious and allowed them full **amnesty**, and even notable positions in his armed forces and governmental organization. There and then, the prophet's journey from revolutionary to sovereign was complete!

Reading Mohammad's life, one can find so many similarities between him and the other revolutionaries, who tried to change the world but world, changed them. Mohammad being an actual person (unlike such mythical characters like Moses and Jesus with no direct historical confirmation), is so real and flesh-and-blood that we can easily see his similarities with many other **revolutionaries** everywhere and even down to our own time (Cromwell, Robespierre, Lenin, Mao and even Khomeini).

At the end, no story is luscious without a bit of rumour. In Islamic tradition, it is known that the first wife of Mohammad (Khadijeh) was the first Muslim believer, and that the prophet did not marry anyone else (although Khadijeh was 15 years his senior) as long as she was living. Apparently, it was **Khadijeh** who proposed marriage to the then shy Mohammad (a 25 year-old bachelor in her employment). It is also reported that Khadijeh was of a monotheistic family (Hanifian), who were mostly Jewish. Now, based on Jewish traditions, even if a person born into the faith recants Judaism, they are still considered a Jew. More interestingly, Jewish lineage is a maternal one, going from mothers to their offspring. Therefore, those beliefs can make Khadijeh, her daughter Fatima and her grandsons Hassan and Hossein, all Jewish!

Reference: [The 23 years of prophecy, by Prof. Ali Dashti.](#)

### 3. Golden Age of Persia

The Arab Islamic conquests of the seventh century were of the same magnitude as the Persian conquests of 500 BC, Macedonian's of 300 BC, Rome's in 100 BC and Sassanians of 200 CE. The united and faithful barbaric **tribes of Arabia** were able to defeat two glorious civilizations of Persia and Byzantine, and took over an immense empire stretching from Morocco to India. The Arabic language grew from a limited Semitic tongue to dominate the Middle East, and Islam reshaped the Eastern cultural and religious outlook.

Sadly, western Iran was decimated by the Arab invasion, but the Persian culture survived in the Eastern provinces (especially Khorasan), where there was less resistance from the general populace and the Parthian minded nobility. **Khorasan** soon became the cradle of a new version of Persian identity and language (Farsi), as well as an independent military and political power.

The vicious internal Arab power struggles, which quickly assassinated 3 of the 4 original Muslim caliphs (Rashedin) and created the Sunni-Shia schism, enabled the independent minded Iranians to rapidly play a determining role in the Islamic Empire. In 750 CE, the Khorasan garrison rioted and lead by Abomuslim Khorasani, defeated the Umayyad caliph in Baghdad and brought their rivals (the Abbasids) to power. This victory initiated the dominance of **Farsi governments** in Khorasan, including the Taheri, the Safari, the Bueyeh and finally the Samanians.

The Taheri rule (810 CE) was a governorship well under the Caliph of Baghdad, but the Bueyeh actually conquered Baghdad and turned the Caliph into their puppet (year 945). The Samanians built a completely independent nation in Khorasan, where the Farsi language and culture flourished, and provided the bedrock for a distinct Iranian identity that has survived to this day. The **Samanian kings** were avid supporters of the Farsi identity, and supported such Iranian poets as Rudaki and Daghighi.

Despite their cultural and political greatness, the Samanian kings as well as the Abbasid caliphs soon became inundated with a massive migration of the **Turkish tribes** from Central Asia. Those Turks, who first enrolled their armies in the services of the Farsi and Arab kings, through their physical and character merits, subsequently took over the governance of the entire Middle East!

Influenced by the Samanian Farsi society, the new Turk rulers surprisingly maintained an avid support for the Farsi culture and their method of government (**Viziers and Dabirs**). The Ghaznavi Turks overthrew the Samanians in 1,005 CE and established a powerful empire in central Asia. They quickly converted to Sunni Islam, adopted Farsi as their court language, and provided a magnificent support to such Iranian luminaries as Beeroni, Farrokhi, Manuchehri and Ferdowsi.

It should be noted that the ‘new Turkish blood’ not only infiltrated and strengthened the Arabic and Persian nations, but also influenced the growth of the **Jewish faith in Euro-Asia**. After conversion to Judaism, a major Turkic tribe (the Khazars) established a new key Jewish state in Eastern Europe, which later on, significantly contributed to the Ashkenazi population in Russia, Poland and Germany.

The Turkish waves of invasion, from Central Asia, did not cease. The Seljuk Turks took over Khorasan and Iran, and then even captured Baghdad in 1,055 CE. They too became Sunni Muslim and very Farsi oriented, with most of their bureaucrats and Viziers chosen among the Iranians. Amazingly, the Seljuk even exceeded the Ghaznavi in their support of the Farsi culture, and cultivated such luminaries as Anvari and Khayyam. Their legendary vizier (Nezam-al-molk) created the first **Iranian universities** (Nezamieh). The Seljuk kings soon dominated the Muslim world with an empire stretching from central Asia to Arabia, and later became the forefathers to the Ottoman Empire.

The main challenge to the Seljuk rule came from the Shia Arab rulers of Egypt (the Fatimid), who opposed both the Sunni Caliphs of Baghdad, and the domineering Turks of Iran. The Fatimid established a network of supporters in Iran, **the Esmaeli**, who soon developed a viciously militant tactic and became famous as the Hashashin (Assassins).



That Shia-Sunni rivalry decimated the Seljuk government, as the Esmaeli established themselves in several **formidable castles** (including Alamot) and spread fear and terror throughout Iran. Their biggest ‘achievement’ was the assassination of the Iranian vizier (Nezam-al-molk) in 1092 CE, which escalated into a series of instabilities and wars of succession among the Seljuk.

The destabilized Seljuk princes fought one another and the Esmaeli for decades, causing widespread destruction of the cities and populace. Finally, another warlike Turkish tribe from Central Asia (the Khwarizmi) exploited the Seljuk/Esmaeli conflict and fought their bloody way into the Iranian plateau. The **Khwarizm Shah** briefly (1210 to 1220) ruled over a decimated country with weakened resources and scarce manpower. A great misfortune was that the widespread Iranian and even Muslim discord and internal blood-shedding coincided with an unprecedented Mongol unification and revival.

Many scholars consider the period prior to 1,220 CE as the Golden Age of Persia and even the **golden age of Islam**. At that time the Persian and the Abbasid culture, science and arts established themselves at such a magnificent plateau that none of the contemporary nations of the world could rival it. Moreover, the grand achievements of that period carried over to Europe (through the crusades period) and caused a global influence over the entire humanity’s development.

As examples, the philosophical and medical works of **Avicenna** were taught in the European universities until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The mathematical contributions of **Khayyam** and Khwarizmi became the cornerstone of modern mathematics and astronomy. Furthermore, the literary contributions of **Ferdowsi**, Rudaki and Sadie established our distinct Farsi identity to this day.

A relevant reference: [The Golden Age of Persia, by R. Frye.](#)

#### 4. Safavids and Shia Domination in Iran

The new Khan of the united Mongol tribes (**Genghis**) was rapidly expanding eastward into the Chinese territories, but apparently; he was considering Iran more as a potential trade partner towards Europe, rather than an immediate target. Therefore, Genghis was astonished when the riches of a Mongol caravan were confiscated by the border guards of Iran, and all the 200 merchants and guards were executed. He sent another group of emissaries directly to **Khwarizm Shah's** court with a plea for retribution, but they too were killed! In response, the angered Mongol chief sent a massive army of 200,000 murderers into Iran.

The first wave of Mongol invasion (1220 to 1224) destroyed most of the **Khorasan** cities (the cradle of Farsi civilization), killing millions and enslaving millions more! All eastern centers of Iranian culture, agriculture and business were irrevocably destroyed or devastated. Genghis wanted such a bloody revenge on the Eastern Iranians that the rest of the country would collapse in fear, therefore, his army spared no brutality on the general populace.

The second wave of Mongol carnage (1260 to 1275) was unleashed by Hüllago the grandson of Genghis, who invaded central Iran all the way to Baghdad and Syria! He even killed the Muslim Caliph and destroyed all the Esmaeli castles. This carnage put an end to the 'golden age of Islam' and plunged the Muslim world into **200 years of darkness**. The third wave (1365 to 1405) was carried out by another murderous Mongol descendent (**Tamerlane**), who this time under the banner of Islamic Jihad, ravaged Iran, Turkey, Syria and even parts of India; killing, burning, pillaging and destroying everything in his path.

The total Mongol carnage and the ensuing famines and plagues are estimated to have killed about 50 million people, or half the population of the Middle East! That senseless barbaric blow destroyed most of the Arab and Iranian urban centers, and stunted the development of Islamic civilization for centuries. All that took place, just as the **European countries** were waking up from their long slumber and entering the Renaissance period.

After Tamerlane, Iran was again divided among feuding Mongol and Turkic tribes, who established several small khanates. Their fighting and consolidation took another 100 years, before a confederation of tribes (**Ghezelbash**) united around a spiritually mesmerizing Iranian family, the Safavids. The **Safavids** were a powerful Shia-Sufi cult, who had started in Ardabil and expanded into the rest of Azerbaijan and Gilan. Tamerlane who was also Shia, had granted them some land and thousands of Turkic slaves, whom he had captured during his Asia Minor campaigns.

It took the Safavids fifty years and three generations of warriors to gain the control of north western Iran. Finally, their young and charismatic leader crushed the resistance of rival Turkic tribes and was crowned as **Shah Esmael**, in 1501 at Tabriz. The fifteen year old Esmael was so inspiring, courageous and heroic that many of his followers believed him to be the **Shia messiah** (Mahdi). In ten short years, Shah Esmael captured all the traditional lands of Iran and became a neighbour of the Ottomans in west and Uzbeks in east, both Sunni Muslims.

Unfortunately, instead of building trade, cultural and military alliances with the neighbouring Muslim nations, the fanatic Safavids attacked first the **Uzbeks** and then the **Ottomans**. This started 350 years of animosity that bleed all three nations' strength, like a chronic infectious injury. At the beginning of those wars, the Ghezelbash were jubilant that their invincible messiah would soon take over the world! Indeed, Esmael looked unbeatable too, until the more modern Ottoman army equipped with rifles and artillery, defeated him in 1514 at **Chalderon**.

After the defeat of Chalderon and the collapse of Tabriz, the Safavids had to flee and move their capital to Ghazvin and then Isfahan. The crazed and frustrated Ghezelbash took revenge on the indigenous Sunni population of Iran (approximately 75% of nation) and **forcefully converted** most of them to Shia and killed or harassed the rest.

After Esmael, Shah Tahmausp came to power, who imported many Shia **clerics from Lebanon**, in order to strengthen the Safavids ideological hold on the Iranian society. Those clerics soon proliferated in the central

Iran and especially Isfahan, and established such a priestly caste that was unprecedented since the time of the Zoroastrian Moubads.

After the half-century reign of Tahmausp ended in 1579, the country descended into fierce fighting among his many sons and successors. Finally, after eight bloody years, the young and energetic Abbas came to power, who built the fledging kingdom into a **powerful empire**.

**Shah Abbas** (the great) revived the Iranian army through close ties with the emerging European powers, especially the British. He also curtailed the wanton hold of the rival Ghezelbash tribes throughout the country, and established a sense of normalcy and security. With those improvements, the nation prospered and the Safavid's military might grew. Abbas defeated both Uzbeks and Ottomans, obtaining more favourable border arrangements in Khorasan and Mesopotamia.

Sadly, like most dictators, Abbas could not escape the corrupting influence of **absolute power**, and near the end, turned neurotic and suspicious. He killed and blinded so many of his sons and other male Safavids that after his death, finding a successor became a challenge. His suspicion and bloody suppression of the Ghezelbash nobility, also, alienated most of them from playing an active role in the kingdom. Hence, despite his many contributions to Iran and especially Isfahan, the Safavids started a steady decline after Abbas's passing in 1629.

A relevant reference: [Iran under the Safavids, by R. Savory.](#)

## 5. Nader Shah: from Dream to Nightmare

Nader's reign started like a fairytale and ended like a nightmare. In 20 short years, Nader saved Iran from servitude and mayhem, raised it to the level of a respectable regional power and then plunged it again in blood and anarchy!

The final blow to the Safavids dynasty came from the disgruntled Sunni people of Afghanistan. In 1720, a **rebellious Afghan army** toppled the weak Safavid king (Shah Sultan Hussein) and pillaged Isfahan. Their uprising was a direct result of Sunni suppression in the Kandahar province, and their success was due to the steady weakening of the army and Ghezelbash, and the deteriorating court spirit under the mind-numbing influence of Shia mullahs.

To fight the Afghan conquest, the Safavids united around a young successor to the murdered king, and designated **Nader Khan** as the army chief. Nader was a minor Afshar (a Ghezelbash tribe) warlord, but a military genius and extremely courageous. Nader's army defeated the Afghans in 1729, and he subsequently removed the incapable Safavid heir, and crowned himself as Nader Shah, in 1736.

Nader's reign started like a fairytale and ended like a nightmare. At the beginning, Nader was regularly consulting the Ghezelbash chiefs and the learned nobility; tried to **reconcile the Shia-Sunni** animosity; managed to obtain a respectable peace treaty with both the Uzbeks and the Ottomans; and lowered the tax burden on the general populace.

Unfortunately, the huge army that Nader had gathered during the war years encouraged him to march in the militaristic path of the likes of Genghis and Tamerlane. Besides, with each bloody campaign of pillage and terror, Nader descended deeper and deeper into the abyss of **paranoia and rage**. Nader's most infamous military aggression was the invasion of India, to plunder their riches.

India had never had any war with Iran, and since antiquity was linked to us, through cultural, linguistic and religious ties. Nader's brutal invasion

of that country and the merciless looting, raping and **pillaging of Delhi**, not only is a shameful example of cruelty, but also weakened the Indian Muslim state to be subsequently colonized by the British Empire.

Nader's greed for treasures did not abate after the plundering of most Indian jewels, such as the **Peacock throne** and the diamonds of Kohinoor and Daryinoor. He concealed much of those loots in the remote Khorasan Mountains (Kalat Naderi), and then increased the taxes to pay for the maintenance of his huge army (Urdu), which by this time had even developed its own hybrid language.

Nader's final years are filled with suspicion and conspiracy, as he embarked on killing and blinding all the potential rivals, including his **own sons**. Finally, a group of his trusted generals, lead by a nephew, attacked his grand tent at night and killed him in 1747. In 20 short years, Nader had saved Iran from servitude and mayhem, raised it to the level of a respectable regional power and then plunged it again in blood and anarchy!

Immediately after Nader's assassination, his army broke up along several ethnic and tribal lines, each trying to find and fetch as much of the cursed Kalat loot as possible. The Afghans went east to establish the independent **Afghanistan state**, lead by the Dorani's, who continued to raid India for the next fifty years. The Qajars (another Ghezelbash tribe) converged in Mazandaran and began fighting against Nader's murderous nephew in Khorasan and the Zands (Bakhtiari tribe) based in Isfahan and Shiraz.

Finally, after many more years of fighting filled with torture and madness, a more benevolent Khan of Zands (Karim Khan), could re-ascertain a measure of Iranian sovereignty and peace. Unfortunately, those **fifty years of murder and mayhem** not only ruined most of the Safavids cultural and social achievements, but also instilled a sick psyche of brutality and madness in the Iranian subconscious. Karim Khan maintained a relatively generous and caring government from his new capital in Shiraz, but could not establish a lasting and durable system to outlive his passing in 1779.

After Karim Khan, the various khans of Zands fought for his **succession** for ten bloody years; till another fine example of Persian nobility (Lotfali Khan) could prevail over his cruel cousins. Unfortunately, by that time the Qajars had regained military power in the North and united around their castrated but brutally determined Khan (Agha Mohammad).

Agha Mohammad conducted a merciless campaign of terror against Lotfali, who had to take refuge in **Kerman**. When Kerman fell, Agha Mohammad tortured and massacred the captured Zands, blinded all the men of Kerman and enslaved the women and children.

Agha Mohammad Khan then continued along the lines of Nader's tradition of fighting and looting, and invaded the caucuses in 1795. He successfully defeated the **Christian king of Georgia**; looted the city of Tbilisi; made a minaret from the severed heads of thousands of their men; and enslaved their wives and daughters. This created such a steer in the Christian Russia that the Tsar accepted the full future protection of Georgia, leading to a generation of Persian-Russian wars.

In 1797, while again campaigning in the caucuses, Agha Mohammad Shah was assassinated by two of his servants. The servants were apparently under suspicion of having eaten a **melon** from the Shah's kitchen, and were jailed to be executed pending the royal's final decision.

A relevant reference: [The History of Iran, by E. Daniel.](#)

## 6. Qajars Trapped in the Great Game

After Agha Mohammad fell, his army disintegrated and several months of infighting followed among the Qajar princes. Finally, his nephew was crowned as **Fatah-Ali Shah**, in 1798, whose only Fatah (victory) was over several hundred wives and concubines.

The 35 years of Fatah-Ali Shah's reign witnessed a gradual decline of Qajar dynasty, who started the nineteenth century like blood-thirsty wolves, but finished it like frail rats. The crippling blow came in the form of **Persian-Russian wars**. In 1800, incapable of protecting his people against the Qajar invasions, the king of Georgia simply relinquished his crown to the Tsar of Russia! This initiated 14 years of war that coincided with the Napoleonic wars in Europe.

As **Napoleon** invaded Russia and even captured Moscow, the tide of war temporarily turned in favour of the Iranians (lead by the crown prince Abbas Mirza). However, the Russian people united against the invading French army, and aided by their severe winter conditions, defeated Napoleon and achieved supremacy in Eastern Europe. The Russian morale and troop surge reached the Persian front in 1814 and severely defeated the Qajars, forcing them to accept an undignified peace treaty (Golestan). A similar defeat followed in 1826, as the Qajar crown prince again fought with the Russians, leading to the even more ignominious treaty of Turkmenchi, which annexed all of the Armenia and the Caspian Sea, and half of the **Azerbaijan** to Russia.

In 1834, after Fatah-Ali Shah's passing, Abbas Mirza's son was crowned as Mohammad Shah. The new Shah soon fought with both his vizier (Ghaem Maugham) and his mentors (the British). He tortured and killed the learned vizier and invaded the **British allies in Afghanistan**, which both were shameful and unnecessary bloodletting.

After Mohammad Shah's passing in 1848, his young crown prince became **Nasser-al-din Shah**, whose reign lasted for just short of 50 years. The new shah started with dramatic reforms and improvements, led by his energetic and popular vizier (Amir Kabir). Unfortunately, the



corrupt Qajar court led by the Shah's mother were hurt by the reforms and vigorously conspired against **Amir Kabir**, and finally toppled him after two years of relentless scheming.

At the same time, there was a religious uprising in most Persian cities, which threatened to curtail the power of mullahs and the brutal Qajar princes. After an unsuccessful coup attempt though, the **Baha'i uprising** was brutally suppressed by the Shia masses and the Qajar forces, resulting in the torturous death of most leaders and the exile of the rest. The Baha'i faith maintained a dissident underground existence in Iran, but was unable to convince the Shia of their founder's incredible claim to have been the promised Mahdi or his gateway (Baub).

After ten years of religious struggles and remorse over the unjust execution of Amir Kabir, Nasser-al-din Shah agreed to another attempt at reforming the backward state of Persia, this time under a new vizier (Moshir-al-doleh). Like Amir Kabir, the new vizier had learned the basics of European style reforms, while serving as emissary in Moscow and Baghdad. Influenced by the British supported reforms in the **Ottoman Empire**, he enlisted the help of many Western minded intellectuals to move the country's affairs away from backwardness and ignorance.

To avoid Amir Kabir's macabre faith, **Moshir-al-doleh** followed a much more conservative path. He both tried to enlighten the Shah by taking him to a European tour of the advanced countries, and pursued foreign investments through granting industrial concessions. Unfortunately, both of the Moshir-al-doleh initiatives (although started with honest intentions) resulted in harmful consequences.

Shah loved the worldly **pleasures of Europe** so much that he became addicted to more glamorous trips. In addition, the corrupt Qajar court discovered the delicious art of peddling various concessions for the foreign nationals, and receiving their sweetener. Therefore, in 1874 the reformer vizier was replaced with a more "amusing" character, who instead of tiring industrial tours, could arrange a lot more attractive programs in Paris!

The deluge of **foreign concessions** caused an added economic hardship for the general populace of Persia, who now had to pay for the added taxes and tariffs associated with those activities. This resulted in a number of riots and uprisings, most notably the so called tobacco obstruction. The popular movement against unfair tobacco levies, united the few modernist intellectuals with the more numerous reform-minded clergies, whose alliance successfully engaged the Shah and forced him to cancel the very unpopular tobacco concession, in 1891.

After nearly 50 years of Nasser-al-din Shah's reign, the Iranians were probably better off than before. But they were much more discontent; as many could now read in the sprouting newspapers about the amazing advances in Europe (both technologically and democratically) and even some Asian nations (like Japan). But Shah was unreceptive towards further reforms and afraid of the few **young school graduates** and the enlightened clergy. Hence, instead of cheering up for his bicentennial, a disgruntled intellectual shot the Shah to death, while on a religious pilgrimage!

In 1896, the Qajar crown prince replaced his martyred father and was crowned as Mozafar-al-din Shah. The new king was old and sickly, but still craved similar glamorous visits to Paris. Hence, he too granted many wide ranging concessions to finance his lavish sojourns. One of them was for the exploration and production of **petroleum in Southern Iran** (for 60 years) that went to a British citizen, for the payment of 40,000 pounds and 16% of the profit. When the unlucky entrepreneur ran out of funds before striking oil, the British government bought his concession cheaply, and soon built a most lucrative industry out of that dark and smelly fluid!

A relevant reference: [Persia in the Great Game, by A. Wynn.](#)

## 7. Constitutional Revolution and WWI

The Iranian constitutional revolution was led by a few intellectuals who were inspired by the **Western ideals of liberty and equality**. The English had one in the seventeenth century, which ultimately turned their kings into figureheads and the country as led by an elected parliament. Both the French and the Americans went even further in the eighteenth century, abolishing the royalty and instituting Roman-inspired republics. There were two triggers to the constitutional uprising in Persia; firstly, the exorbitantly higher costs of consumer goods, due to the increased tariffs and levies. Secondly, shockwaves of the Russian revolution of 1905 at the news of Japan's unbelievable victory over the Tsar's navy.

After a year of struggles, in 1906, Mozafar-al-din Shah agreed to the establishment of a parliament, where people's representatives could assemble and pass laws for a democratic Persia. The first act of Majles was a **European style constitution** that was approved by the compromising Shah, days before his passing. However, the new king (Mohammad-Ali) was strongly opposed to any liberal restrictions over his absolute power, and conspired to use the religious Shia sentiments against the new parliament. Shah's strongest ally was a lead cleric (Sheik Fazlollah Norrie) who despised the free-thinking constitutionalists. Clergies like Norrie believed that the laypeople of Persia were not even capable of properly washing their hands without specific instructions from a Marjah mullah, let alone passing laws!

In the summer of 1908, Shah's Cossack brigade invaded the parliament, jailed all the deputies and murdered the liberal leaders. Similar attacks decimated the ranks of libertarians all over the country, except for Tabriz where a small-scale armed resistance grew into a full fledged uprising. The **Tabriz uprising** was aided by the armed revolutionaries from the neighbouring Russian territories (Baku and Armenia), and ignited similar rebellions in Rasht and Isfahan. The ensuing civil war ended when in the spring of 1909, the revolutionary forces captured Tehran, sent the murderous Shah to exile and unleashed revenge on the reactionaries like Norrie.

However, the victorious constitutionalists inherited a bankrupt country, which was not only one of the poorest in the world, but also highly **indebted to Russia and Britain**. All through the nineteenth century, those two colonial superpowers were engaged in a fierce competition (the Great Game) over dominance in Asia. The Great Game had bleed Persia but allowed the feeble Qajars to barely survive, as each side vied for their allegiance. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Anglo-Russian animosity was replaced by a common fear of the newly rising powers of Europe (Germany) and Asia (Japan). In 1907, England and Russia had concluded a friendship pact, which also unceremoniously divided Persia into two separate **spheres of influence**. Russia was granted a de-facto control over all economical activities in the North, and Britain in the South. The newborn constitutional government in Tehran was helpless against that arrangement, because most of the country's riches were already lost through concessions.

The new government's bankruptcy also created animosity and fierce fighting among the once allied constitutionalists. The **leftists (Democrats)** who were inspired by the Russian socialists, wanted to radicalize the movement and confiscate land and riches from the princes, landlords and mullahs. The moderates were aiming at achieving modernization and improvement, but with no money in the coffers, they could not affect any positive outcome.

The superpowers' dominance in Iran was followed by outright occupation during the **First World War**. In effect, Persia became a protectorate of Russia and England, from 1912 to 1921. The level of misery and hardship during that decade is mindboggling and appalling. It is estimated that 20% of the total population (10 million) perished in civil wars (among Armenians, Kurds, Turks, Bakhtiari, Ghashghai, pro-Germans, pro-British, Arabs, Baluchi, etc.); fighting between the rival Ottomans and Russians, who used Northern Iran as their battle ground and source of supplies; and widespread famines and plagues that wiped-out entire towns and villages.

WWI killed tens of millions of people in Europe, and caused the **collapse of the Russian and German empires**. Russia soon turned into a communist country and Germany adopted Nazism. Britain emerged

victor from the war, but so wounded and weak that London could not afford to maintain the Persian occupation all by herself. Iran was descending into chaos! The great rivalry between the two superpowers also restarted; with the Russian communists (Reds) becoming openly hostile to Britain and their counter-revolutionary allies (Whites). In 1921, the final collapse of the Whites culminated in a new power balance in the Persian arena.

A relevant reference: [Iranian Constitutional Revolution, by J. Afary.](#)

## 8. Reza Shah Corrupted by Power

In 1920, Britain agreed to withdraw her troops from Iran, as the Soviets promised to withhold their support of the secessionist movements in Azerbaijan (Democrat party), Gilan (Mirza Kochak) and Khorasan (colonel Pesian). Apparently, an implicit accord was also struck to support a new reformist government in Tehran. The British had tried to maintain their de-facto protectorate in Persia, but failed with their aborted 1919 treaty, which created a groundswell of nationalist emotions. However, the ineffective **government of the Qajar** nobility in Tehran was also helpless in even establishing a modicum of national sovereignty and security. Hence, as the deadline of spring 1921 approached for the promised British withdrawal from Persia, a dramatic action became necessary.

The 1921 coup-d'état by Seyyed Zia (reformist journalist) and Reza Khan (Cossack brigade) commenced with the promise of removing the chokehold of Qajar nobility from the government, establishing Persian sovereignty throughout Iran, and providing security for the suffering masses. The coup masters forcefully obtained **premiership for the Seyyed** and the war ministry for Reza, from the bewildered Ahmad Shah who was fully aware of the British role in that whole affair. As a show of force and promise, Seyyed quickly ordered the arrest of some hundred Qajar nobilities on grounds of treason and embezzlement; threatening to execute them, if they did not return their dubiously acquired riches. He also engaged the renegade rebellion leaders of the North to interest them in supporting his government. Both moves aggravated the rich and powerful of Tehran, who in turn approached Reza Khan with all sorts of promises and gifts; if he would just remove the Zia.

Reza Khan was a forceful but illiterate military man, who as a poor orphan had to fend for himself since the tender age of 12. The brutish army life had made him both resourceful and ruthless. He accepted the nobility's lavish gifts and within 3 months, **toppled his co-conspirator** to exile. A scion of Qajar politics (Qavam-al-sultana) became prime minister; Reza Khan maintained the war portfolio, and the Majles was

reopened after six years. Shortly after the 1921 coup, the Soviets recognized the new government, and even signed a friendship treaty with the new cabinet. This spelled trouble for the Northern democratic and secessionist movements, who were one-by-one suppressed by the rejuvenated army of Reza Khan. Reza then focused his attention on establishing sovereignty in the oil-rich South, and toppled the powerful and British-backed governance of Sheikh Khazal in Arabestan (today's Khuzestan).

Reza Khan's glorious victories, which had finally **reunited Persia** after ten miserable years, endeared him to most ranks of nobility, intellectuals and the general populace. His avid supporters (like Teymourdash) even started a campaign to abolish the monarchy, and like the Turkish republic of Kamal Atatürk, install Reza Khan as the president. However, the conservative right and the liberal left, who were both wary of Reza's dictatorial intentions, united around the notion of "republic is against Islam" and organized mass religious demonstrations. Unfazed by the opposition's populist tactics, Reza Khan's camp reshaped their campaign and made a case for the outright removal of the corrupt Qajar dynasty (blamed for all problems); and the installation of a powerful Persian ruler, without resorting to the '**un-Islamic republic**'! At the conclusion of that bizarre horse-trading, Iran was denied the more modern republic system, and Majles installed Reza as the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, in 1926.

When Reza Shah was crowned, Iran (then called Persia) was one of the poorest Asian countries! During the first six years of his reign, Reza Shah made a constructive pact with his intellectual backers, **lead by Teymourdash**, to let them run the country, while Shah built and lead the army. With that active encouragement, the government intellectuals rapidly weaved a number of social, legal, financial, cultural and industrial innovations into the ancient country's fabric. Western style (non-religious) schools were built for both boys and girls. Civil Law was instituted based on the European codes. Tehran University was founded as the new backbone for training doctors, engineers and other professionals. Roads, railways and industrial facilities were constructed, to facilitate agricultural trade and modern manufacturing. The peace and

security provided by Reza Shah's new army, as well as the increased oil income, made all those improvements possible.

Reza Shah truly instigated the wide ranging modernization of Iran from a filthy, backward and lawless shell-of-an-state, to a functioning and advancing society. With the new roads and trucks, the all too frequent famines of the earlier twentieth century disappeared. Under the new army's watchful eyes, bandits and tribes could no longer rob the caravans or invade towns and villages. The new schools and colleges gave hope and purpose to many youths for a better future and the flourishing of their talents. **Emancipation of women** encouraged that half of the population to play a more active role in public life. Municipal modernizations, public health initiatives and vaccinations, lowered the infant and general mortality rates and provided a brighter outlook for young families.

Unfortunately, Reza Shah was fundamentally an illiterate bully who soon became intoxicated with power! As **the power corrupts**, Reza became more and more callous, suspicious and brutal in the treatment of, first the opposition, and then even his own allies and friends. The opposing members of parliament (e.g. Modarres, and Mosaddeq) were banished and exiled. All the political parties were pushed out, and the Majles elections became a process of backroom nominations followed by routine vote rigging by the army and police chiefs. The government intellectuals (like Teymourdash) were initially complacent in that sordid departure from the principles of constitutional monarchy, until they too became victims of the dictator's unrelenting greed and paranoia. One by one, the same team of luminaries who had elevated Reza Khan from a Cossack to the war minister, the prime minister and finally the Shah; became targets of the secret police investigations; ended up in jail on trumped up charges; and were poisoned or tortured to death by Reza Shah's notorious gang of henchmen.

By the mid 1930's, Reza Shah had complete control of the country and was treating it like his own property, and the populace like helpless servers. Thirty years after the constitutional revolution, the country had again fully digressed from liberty to tyranny. Shah was not only after the absolute power, but also absolute wealth; as he forced most



landowners to relinquish their properties or face persecution and death. It is estimated that by the end of his reign, Reza Shah had unlawfully obtained titles to **40% of the best agricultural lands** in Iran! He also extended his reach to the oil contract with the British (Anglo-Persian Oil Company), tore it up and secretly set up a new arrangement to siphon a sizable share of that income into his own foreign accounts.

At the same time in central Europe, Nazi (Germany) and Fascist (Italy) sentiments brought racist maniacs like Hitler and Mussolini into power. Reza Shah was mesmerized by the powerful images of those super thugs; and soon expelled most of the English and French advisors and replaced them with the **German agents**. He was so intoxicated by the Aryan hallucinations of Hitler, that even changed the country's name; tried to remove all Arab insignia (camels, turbans and mosques); and engaged in secret pacts regarding the future power struggles in Europe.

During the first two years of the **Second World War**, the Axis (Germany, Italy and Japan) forces were extremely successful. Hitler was able to pacify the Russians by signing a friendship treaty with Stalin, and avoided direct action against the neutral Americans. German troops successfully blitzed Poland, France, Denmark, Belgium, Holland and Greece; and many other nations (e.g. Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) joined the Axis. All of Europe was falling under the bleak reign of fascist terror! In East Asia too, the Japanese captured Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Singapore and most of China. England itself looked alone and miserable, under the constant German aerial bombardments and submarine attacks!

Reza Shah's position of apparent neutrality combined with implicit collaboration with the Nazi's, was initially sustainable; because Iran's northern neighbour (Russia) also had a friendship treaty with Germany. Therefore, the beleaguered British who were based in both Iraq (English protectorate since 1918) and today's Pakistan (then part of India), could only hope and try to appease Reza Shah, in order to avoid threats on their **Khuzestan oil fields**. But the treacherous surprise German attack on the Russians, in the summer of 1941, changed that entire balance!

All of a sudden, Iran was surrounded by anti-German forces on all sides; and the allies desperately needed to send aid and supplies to the beleaguered Russians, who were being mercilessly massacred by the advancing Nazi forces. **Britain and Russia** gave formal ultimatums to Reza Shah, requesting the expulsion of thousands of German advisors and personnel from Iran, and the opening of national railway for aid transport to Russia. When Reza Shah foolishly declined, the Allied forces easily occupied Iran from north and south; the army collapsed within two days; and Reza Pahlavi had to abdicate, relinquish most of his wealth and leave for exile.

A relevant reference: [A history of Iran, by Prof. Michael Axworthy.](#)

## 9. Roots of Fundamentalism in Modern Iran

In 1941, after the forceful abdication of Reza Shah, the angry British government, who saw Reza as a former ally turned into a treacherous enemy, seriously considered the restoration of Qajar dynasty. However, the lead Iranian intellectuals (like Foroughi) could only foresee a major political upheaval, with the return of arrogant Qajars. Although **Foroughi** was persecuted by Reza Shah, he reasoned that the country had truly democratic laws (constitution) and if the Pahlavi crown prince was ready to respect them, there was no reason for a regime change. That way, **Mohammad Reza Shah** came to be the new constitutional monarch of Iran, who for nearly a decade respected the democratic institutions of the country.

With the fall of Reza Shah, his surviving political victims were freed from the prison, and angrily started various political parties, secessionist movements and Islamist revivals. Most significantly, the freed communists founded the **Tudeh Party**, and the Azerbaijan leftists restarted the **Democrat Party** and its bid for separation. The Tudeh Party soon grew to become the most well organized political entity in Iran, and the Democrat party's collaboration with the Russian occupation granted them the de-facto governance of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. In Tehran, many powerless prime ministers came and went, with the real power in the hands of the three foreign embassies (Russian, British and American) whose military forces were occupying Iran. The young Shah's main contributions were to revive the collapsed Iranian army, and to win the formal agreement of all three powers to evacuate Iran within six months after the end of WWII.

The war ended in summer of 1945, with Germany and Japan devastated and turned into occupied territories; Britain and France wounded and demoted to second rate powers; while the United States and the Soviet Russia rose to the level of **New Superpowers**. Sadly, the repressive communist regime of Stalin could not cooperate with the capitalist block, and the second half of the twentieth century turned into an all encompassing East-West power struggle (**the Cold War**). As both superpowers quickly acquired vast nuclear arsenals, their struggle

became “Cold” and indirect, with almost all the hot and bloody fighting happening in the third-world countries of Africa, South America and Asia.

In Iran, the struggles started immediately after the end of WWII. As the British and American forces prepared to leave by the six month deadline, but the Russians decided to stay and protect their puppet governments of the Democrat Party in **Azerbaijan and Kurdistan**. To deal with that treat, Shah and his western allies resorted to a stick-and-carrot policy. US firmly pressed Stalin on the issue, with a threat of retaliatory action; while the reinstated veteran prime minister in Tehran (Ahmad Qavam) awarded three cabinet positions to the Tudeh party and promised a concession of the **North Oil resources to Russia**. Stalin swallowed the bait and his Red Army evacuated the Northern provinces in the autumn of 1946. Swiftly, the Shah’s resurrected army moved into Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, and finished the secessionist movements with minimum resistance and bloodshed. This victory established the Shah as a national hero, whereas the Tudeh party leftists were tainted with the stigma of being ‘Russian-puppets’.

The Tudeh-Shah struggles came to a climax when in early 1949 an Islamist newspaper’s reporter, who was apparently an undercover Tudeh agent, tried to **assassinate the Shah** during a ceremony in the Tehran University. Miraculously, the five bullets fired by the assassin from close range, only bruised Shah’s face and body! The government declared the Tudeh party illegal; their offices were promptly closed, some of their leaders were arrested; but most of the organization quickly went underground. The Islamists group (**Fedaiyan Islam**) was also banned and their suspected clerical leader (Ayatollah Kashani) was briefly jailed. Recovery from such a callous terror attempt further increased Shah’s esteem among the general populace, but at the same time made him more paranoid and wary of all opposition!

Suspicious of all the opposition political parties, Shah rigged the 1949 Majles elections through direct influence peddling and vote rigging by the court minister (Hajir) and the various local police and army chiefs. This was done in such an obvious and blatant fashion that some of the opposition candidates did not win a single vote in their own home

riding! The moderate opposition leaders were completely outraged by that fiasco and joined in a newly organized union (the National Front) to confront and shame the government into cancelling the rigged vote. The underground **Islamists again took to terror** and assassinated the court minister (Hajir) in cold blood. The combination of liberal protests and Islamist terror forced the Shah to cancel the elections. The new vote still maintained the rightwing monarchists' majority, but brought a vibrant nationalist minority to the parliament.

Next year (in 1950) a hardworking and highly decorated military man became prime minister. **General Razmara** was a top France-educated general with many years of honest and dedicated service to the country. Unfortunately, all those qualifications put him at odds with almost every player in the wretched Iranian politics! He was too honest and too direct for the taste of the corrupt Pahlavi court; too Western minded for the leftists and Islamists; and too strong willed for the liberals who still trembled at the memories of another forceful general (Reza Khan).

Therefore, the liberal National Front joined with the Kashani Islamists to condemn the new prime minister, from day one. The sentimental nationalist leader **Mosaddeg** screamed during Razmara's presentation and fainted in the Majles, while the Islamists leader **Kashani** led demonstrations outside the parliament. Politically, the opposition used the issue of oil contract renewal with the British company (AIOC), as the Achilles heal of the new government.

Razmara was hard at work to obtain more favourable terms from AIOC, perhaps in line with the new American contracts in Saudi Arabia (**50/50 profit sharing**). But the opposition proposed an outright nationalization of the oil industry, in order to steer the general populace and throw the government into an **impossible impasse**. During heated debates in the parliament, Mosaddeg and Kashani tried to portray Razmara as a weak and unpatriotic prime minister, who was too scared to nationalize the 'god-given' oil treasure. Attempts by Razmara to sway the public opinion based on the factual inability of the government to run the sophisticated oil industry, played into the opposition's hand to depict him as a non-believer in the 'incredible Persian capability'! All debates

ended with the terror of prime minister by another **Islamist murderer** in spring of 1951.

A relevant reference: [The Persian Puzzle, by K. Pollack.](#)

## 10. Mosaddeg's Legacy and Failure

In the spring of 1951, utterly exuberant by the news of Razmara's assassination, the National Front leaders, Mosaddeg and Kashani intimidated the conservative Majles deputies into accepting the populist mantra of **oil nationalization**, or expect a similar fate as Razmara! Hence, the nationalization bill was passed by the reluctant Majles and the Shah, even though none of them believed in it or even knew how to implement it!

Ludicrously, based on the most pervasive Persian political dogma that "everything is controlled by the English", at the beginning even the Shah perceived Mosaddeg as a British super-agent, who had to be feared and accommodated! Therefore, when everyone refused to accept the responsibility of implementing the oil nationalization bill, the frail Mosaddeg who only had a **10% voting block** in the Majles, came to power as the new prime minister! At the time, the prime ministers' average office-life was less than a year; so the conservative royalists, who voted for Mosaddeg's new cabinet, figured that the 'old man' was a neurotic populist whose government would quickly disintegrate.

The impossible task of nationalizing the Iranian oil industry (with no technicians, engineers, tankers or customers) not only created a major crisis for the new Mosaddeg government, but also shook the confidence of the Labour Party premier in London. The socialist Attlee government was nationalizing many **bankrupt British industries** in the wake of the WWII damages and the wave of colonial independence (especially India). But he could not afford to lose the lucrative AIOC, or force a military solution! That is how for two years, the largest oil refinery of the world in Abadan was stopped; all the crude oil exports were terminated; and Iran was placed under a virtual **trade embargo**.

Britain then asked the Democrat US president (Truman), who was on good terms with Mosaddeg, to intervene in the oil crisis; and at the same time, took Iran to the international court of justice in Holland. But neither a long and hospitable stay in the **United States**, nor the legal actions could change the old man's views by a millimetre! Mosaddeg

was of the opinion that, “the British are wicked and everything that they touch turns nasty! Iran was better off before them and will only improve, when all their influence is gone!” That one-dimensional view shaped the two Mosaddeq years, which can only be compared with the 1906 and the 1979 Revolutionary periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**The first year** of Mosaddeq’s premiership was successfully spent at wild battles on three fronts (oil, Majles and Shah), where glorious victories elevated him from an elite politician to the coveted position of a **national hero**. Mosaddeq sent the troops to take over the oil installations in Khuzestan and effectively forced the British to relinquish 50 years of **monopoly** over the Iranian petroleum industry. In the new parliament elections, his supporters and allies won a slim majority in Tehran and other major cities, and pre-emptively **invalidated** the unfavourable and dubious results coming from the small towns and villages, where the royalist conservatives had the upper hand.

With a cooked Majles majority at hand, Mosaddeq asked Shah for the **control of army** (nomination of war minister) and upon his refusal, resigned in such a dramatic fashion that plunged the country into **open rebellion** (30<sup>th</sup> of Tir). Fearing a full-scale revolution by the hardliners and the Tudeh party (who were behind most riots), Shah had to reinstate the ‘old man’ with the promise that Mosaddeq would not topple the Pahlavi dynasty and in return, **Shah** would desist from undue interference with political affairs. Next day, the ruling from the international court in Holland came in favour of Mosaddeq, which led to unprecedented jubilations in Tehran and major cities. It seemed an old and **stubborn Persian** had finally defeated the loathed Anglos!

Unfortunately, Mosaddeq’s **second year** in the office unravelled all the gains of his first! He proved to be much better as the speaker for opposition than the leader of government, and much more resourceful in weakness than tactful in power. His **emotional and authoritative** style (my way or no way) soon upset and aggravated most of the nationalist and Islamist allies, who gradually turned into sworn enemies. Finally, when Mosaddeq lost the majority support in Majles, he **simply dissolved** it, in order to prevent the parliament from voting him out of the office!



After the Holland defeat, the beaten British were begging for a compromise, but Mosaddeq stubbornly refused any negotiation, on any terms but the full nationalization. In UK and US, his image changed from a peculiar but respectable nationalist to a dangerous adventurer, or even a **communist sympathizer**. Mosaddeq's unrealistic, sentimental and stubborn style of government gradually united all his old and new enemies around the single goal of his dismissal!

Mosaddeq's only remaining allies were a minority in the National Front (young enthusiasts like Fatemi) and a fraction in the still illegal **Tudeh Party**. Nevertheless, he continued to enjoy much popularity among the emotionally charged Iranians, who were mesmerized by his dogged determination.

By summer of 1953, Mosaddeq who had earlier dissolved the Majles (through a controversial referendum) was ruling by decree. He had gained a near **complete control** over the government and the security forces, but at the cost of aggravating some very powerful political players inside and outside Iran! To the Shah, conservatives, Islamists and even the moderate nationalists, he was an out-of-control autocrat. However, **Mosaddeq had no clear plans** of how to run the bankrupt country, how to deal with the growing legion of his enemies, and how to re-start the oil industry! He was often emotionally exhausted, bed ridden and unbalanced.

For the newly installed rightwing governments in Washington (**Eisenhower**) and London (**Churchill**), Mosaddeq was a communist enabler! That is how they became motivated to sponsor an odd coalition of the young Shah, Kashani (Islamist), Bagha'i (nationalist), Shaaban Jafari (street thug) and general Zahedi (maverick). During the coup-d'état that toppled Mosaddeq on **28<sup>th</sup> of Mordad** 1953, a small segment of the security forces fought for the premier. However, after half-a-day of street battles and some 300 casualties, the royalist coalition prevailed. The Tudeh party leadership was divided and stayed on the sidelines, as Moscow was too confused during the bloody power-struggles following **Stalin's death**.

A relevant reference: [All the Shah's Men, by S. Kinzer.](#)

## 11. Shah's First Battle with Khomeini

After the 1953 coup, Shah's reign as an autocratic monarch started. Similar to his father's rule, soon the parliament became a rubberstamp of the royal decrees, and the political rights were in effect suspended. However, it still took the Shah another decade before he could gain the absolute power over his court, the army and the Persian nobility. Meanwhile, he had to contend with his **family**, who were forcing him into divorces and remarriages; the power-hungry **generals** of his army, who were planning coups behind his back; and the older and wiser **nobility**, who were trying to teach and mentor him! Besides, the country was dirt poor and most people were illiterate and living in abject poverty.

Shah's oppression of Mosaddeq's allies was moderate, with only one of them (Dr. Fatimi) executed. However, his secret police (**Savak**) soon found its real target among the underground Tudeh party and its clandestine military branch. Several hundred were arrested and many tortured and executed. Astonishingly, later on the Savak itself became a threat to the Shah, as its first notorious chief (**general Bakhtiar**) planned a coup-d'état, apparently in discussion with the American CIA! In the 1950's, Shah became so disenchanted with his wretched monarchy, that he collapsed in a state of deep despair and depression, and even seriously contemplated **abdication** and 'retirement'!

Two events saved Shah's morale from depression and desperation, a happier marriage and a royal revolution! When Shah's only full-brother died in an airplane crash in 1954, he was left with no heir-apparent. His beautiful wife seemed sterile and in 1958, the royal family forced him into his **second divorce**. This time, instead of wedding a prominent princess or pampered nobility, the 40 year old Shah turned towards a young middle-class university student, who was both intelligent and energetic. The young bride soon blessed him with two sons and two daughters, as well as some degree of hope and happiness.

The royal (White) revolution of 1961 was instigated by the American-inspired new reformist prime minister, **Dr. Ali Amini**, who had also

served in Mosaddeq's cabinet. Amini and his agriculture minister designed a revolutionary **land-reform** program that overnight, disposed of the feudal system in Iran. To that program, they also added clauses for women's suffrage, compulsory secular education, and provincial councils. The new Democrat US president (**Kennedy**) believed that such social reforms were the best remedy for modernizing the 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, without losing them to the communist block.

Not everyone was happy with the "White" revolution. However, the large landowners were appeased by some moderating measures, and the conservative clergies were calmed regarding the compulsory secular schools and the women vote. Unfortunately, a militant ayatollah (**Khomeini**), who had a history of aggressive anti-secular views as well as collaboration with the radical Fedaiyan Islam, rose in fierce disagreement against the Shah's reforms.

Rather than attacking the core and popular items such as the land reform, Khomeini concentrated his attacks against the peripheral issue of provincial councils, where non-Muslims could be elected with no distinction from the Muslims. He condemned that clause as a clear violation of the constitution, which officialised the Shia Islam. He also tied the reformist efforts to the increasing **Jewish and Baha'i** influence over the Shah's government. The ensuing religious uprisings of 1963 (15 Khordad) were viciously suppressed by the riot police and the army, resulting in hundreds of casualties. This caused a major disenchantment among the militant religious groups who had helped bring the Shah to power in 1953, but now felt completely betrayed and brutalized.

Following the 1963 crack down, ayatollah Khomeini was arrested and even psychologically abused in prison. Even so, next year, a new conciliatory prime minister (Mansur) arranged for his release and safe return to Qom. Sadly, the much **westernized Mansur** soon became the target of even more vicious attacks from Khomeini, who declared him an American puppet and initiated some more rioting. This time, Shah forced Khomeini into exile (first to Turkey and then Iraq), to uproot the leadership of religious discontent. Nevertheless, the Islamic militancy continued and Mansur was murdered by the Fedaiyan Islam terrorists in the spring of 1965.

Prime Minister Mansur's assassination heralded a new era of terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare against the Shah's government. Although the fundamentalist Fedaiyan Islam group was soon decimated, two new and actively armed resistance groups (**Peoples Fedaiyan and Peoples Mujahidin**) emerged from the tormented ashes of the Tudeh Party and the National Front. Both groups were radicalized by the Savak suppression of any political dissent, and evolved into Cuban-style militant guerrillas. Also, both of them received significant support, training and arms from the Palestinian resistance fighters, who saw the Shah as a staunch Israeli supporter. In response, Shah packed the leadership of his secret police (Savak) with the most notoriously vicious characters (like general Nasiri), who truly enjoyed the persecution, torture and murder of hundreds of idealistic intellectuals and university students.

In the mid 1960's, Shah decided to take an active role in the affairs of government, which gradually turned into an omnipotent supervision and even direction of all the political, military and social affairs of Iran. In his thirty seven years of reign, Shah steadily turned from a **constitutional monarch** (1941 to 1953) to a meddling king (53 to 63), a benevolent dictator (63 to 75) and finally a **deranged tyrant**. However, the forceful reform decade starting in the mid 1960's was the zenith of his dictatorial reign, which elevated Iran from the lowly ranks of a backward country to a respectable and thriving state.

Shah was unusually energized by the achievements of his 'White' revolution, and the forceful struggle against what he saw as the **communist** (red) and the **religious** (black) reactionaries. For more than a decade, he took the helms of the country, all the time believing that he was taking Iran from the dark ages into the modern era of a grand civilization. To that effect, Shah even assumed the prime ministerial functions, and used a tame figure head (Hoveida) to rubber stamp all his wishes and directions.

A relevant reference: [Majestic Failure, by M. Zonis.](#)

## 12. The Prosperous Hoveida Years

After the royal land and social reforms, Iran quickly progressed in all aspects of material and social achievements, but politically remained a brutally repressive **police-state**. Starting in the mid 1960's, Shah took full control of the helms of country, with a feeble premier (Hoveida) rubber stamping all his wishes.

Hoveida was raised in Lebanon and had spent most of his adult life in Europe, hence, could never grasp the subtleties of dealing with the colourful Persian and Muslim characters. His father had been a **Baha'i**, and Hoveida was rumoured a homosexual. Although at a personal level, he was kind and humane, all that baggage plus his obvious inefficacy made him quite unsuitable to the role of the head of Iranian government. Most Persian nobility were reeling in pain, just to watch his 13 years of uninterrupted premiership; whereas the grandees like Alam, Amini, Zahedi and Qavam had been dismissed within 1 or 2 years. Perhaps, they had forgotten that from time immemorial; Shahs had favoured the services of spineless **eunuchs**, who implemented any and all of their "grand ideas"; and could be thrown to the mob, when things did not work!

On the positive side, during the 1964 to 1977 period, the urban and industrial growth transformed Tehran and the other major cities from the dark ages, when people did not have clean drinking water, sanitation or electricity; to modern metropolitans with all the basic amenities, schools, hospitals, factories and universities.

In contrast, the rural situation did not improve significantly, as most of the newly freed **Raieyat** (serfs) did not have the required financial means to make efficient use of their small land plots. Moreover, the improved medical conditions in the rural areas created a population boom among the village families, who were used to having 5 or 6 children, with only 2 or 3 surviving. Better health care lowered the child and mother mortalities, but being religious, the rural couples remained averse to any birth control. That combination doubled the backward countryside population within the Hoveida years.

Like many other third world countries, the totally uneven urban/rural development created a massive migration of destitute villagers, who could not find meaningful employment in their backward environment, and sought a better chance in the sprawling city construction sites. Most, who could not afford the city rents, had to live in the ever growing slums and shanty towns. The local population growth plus that human deluge **quadrupled** most city populations within the 1953-1978 period.

During the great oil boom of the 1970's, the irrational exuberance of the Iranian upper classes and the unquenchable greed of the royalty played havoc with the domestic economy. Hoveida's half-baked plans for **hasty modernization** and Shah's expensive upgrades for the army, created a number of economical and social dislocations. That deluge of projects, which were unnaturally fuelled by the soaring oil prices, played havoc with the fledging Iranian economy and infrastructure; creating cyclic booms and busts, deficiencies and speculations, inflation and hoarding.

Shah's military background made him eager to build his army as strong and well equipped as possible, in order to prevail over all internal and external advisories. However, progressively, his pride aged into **egomania** and his anxiety escalated to paranoia. Soon, he wanted to establish a truly Persian empire worthy of the Cyrus and the Darius; forcefully enlist all the populace in his grandiose schemes; and even torment the aloof western countries that apparently were not paying him enough respect!

Despite the desperate appeals of his American allies, Shah's aggressive stands in the OPEC effectively lead the oil surge following the 1973 Arab embargo, into a full-fledged price explosion. That propelled the Iranian crude oil income from \$800 million in 1970 to \$18 billion (22 times higher) in 1975, but soon created a worldwide **recession** and a price bust!

Sadly, instead of creating a thoughtful long-term plan for all that windfall fortune, Shah simply channelled a third of it into massive military purchases and the rest into poorly planned grandiose projects, which could not be accommodated within the frail existing infrastructure. Consequently, the soaring and unaccounted for demands

on electricity, housing and transportation exploded into chronic blackouts, rent and real-estate explosions and serious port and delivery bottlenecks; all leading to frequent shortages of everything!

Intoxicated by the oil windfall and daydreaming that he was the greatest king since Cyrus; Shah embarked on a range of **idiotic measures**, which were almost designed to enrage the populace. His grandiose ‘imperial’ make over of Iran, started with a \$200 million dollar imperial gala to celebrate 2,500 years of monarchy in Iran. He then changed the Islamic calendar to a peculiar imperial one, which was never used before anywhere in the world! Finally in 1975, during a surprise televised speech, Shah ordered all the Iranians to either join a new imperial party (**Rastakheez**) or get their passports and leave ‘his’ country! At the same time, the secret police (Savak) kept its torturous chokehold on the Iranian intellectuals, which led to the arrest, torture and early demise of many scholars, authors and students.

On the cultural side, Shah and Hoveida had set aside all pretences regarding any respect towards the religious and ethical sensitivities of the 95% Muslim population. The state-run television, the government-censured cinemas and the Pahlavi-sponsored Shiraz ‘art festival’ would routinely broadcast such explicit **sexual content**, which was insulting and demeaning to the general populace. In reaction, the bulk of religious masses turned to their traditional congregations and mosques for spiritual support and guidance. This was particularly true in case of the migrant rural families who could not adjust to the fast, uncaring and alien pace of life in the sprawling but characterless Tehran.

The secular intellectuals were not any happier either, as their leaders were routinely jailed and tortured, and the slightest sign of dissent would ignite a brutal police and Savak suppression. A sad consequence was that the new and modernized **universities** turned into effective breeding grounds for the underground guerrilla movements, as well as frequent demonstrations and strikes. Even most overseas students became mired in anti-Shah organizations instead of education. In the mid 1970’s, to most secular, liberal or religious intellectuals; Iran felt like a **prosperous** country, but under the militaristic **occupation** of a cruel and alien regime, headed by a brute king and a silly premier, who

were either stealing most of the oil fortune or squandering it! They were unaware that those ‘fun’ years were coming to an abrupt end.

A relevant reference: [The Persian Sphinx, by A. Milani.](#)



### 13. Outbreak that Changed the World

In autumn of 1977, ayatollah Khomeini's son (Mustafa) died under suspicious circumstances, while under exile in Iraq. Iran's **secret police**, which had previously assassinated general Timor Bakhtiar (first head of Savak) and some other opponents in Iraq, was suspected of the killing. The religious community in Iran was upset enough to hold several mourning congregations in the major cities, with a few of them leading to small-scale demonstrations.

Shah was so infuriated with those allegations and demonstrations that he ordered the preparation of a 'rebuttal' article by Hoveida, to be published in the largest national newspaper (Ettelaat). That was another stupid instance of the **Shah/people alienation**, which resulted in an outrageously insulting text against ayatollah Khomeini. Shah's afflicted mental condition contributed to the ordering of such a carelessly vulgar public denunciation of a leading Shia Marjah. In the Ettelaat article, Khomeini was insulted and abused as an English spy from India, who was both a drug addict and a homosexual. That **final folly** triggered an endless cycle of religious and political riots, which resulted in the demise of Pahlavi dynasty.

The 1978 demonstrations quickly united the Iranian opposition around a simple set of declarations and demands: that Shah was a demonic traitor who was ordering the brutal suppression of the people, and that he should relinquish the government, for Iran to achieve '**freedom and independence**'. Not much thought was given to a replacement government, but an Islamic Republic was frequently mentioned, where the ideals of decency and democracy could rule together. Toppling of the much-feared Shah's regime seemed such a remote possibility that the opposition could not readily perceive a future system. The silly general sentiment among the **resentful intellectuals** was that 'anything would be better than the Shah'!

The first half of 1978 was filled with sporadic violent riots in major Iranian cities, which were often brutally suppressed, resulting in several hundred casualties. However, most observers still believed that the

regime could weather the disturbances, and that the Shah's **carrot and stick policy** would save the day. The Shah's regime provided several incentives, including the cancellation of 'imperial' calendar; the dissolution of Rastakheez party; and dismissal of the notorious chief of Savak (Nasiri) and a handful of other infamous characters.

Indeed during that summer, the rioting abated, until a disastrous calamity in Abadan reignited the powder keg. The **Cinema Rex** torching, which has since been blamed on the Islamists, was squarely attributed to the Shah's Savak and was believed so by the distrustful masses. Overnight, there was a tenfold increase in widespread demonstrations! In response, Shah ordered a brutal crack down of Tehran's protests on the **Black Friday** in Zhaleh Square, which effectively removed all hope for a peaceful compromise.

In the autumn of 1978, everything started to fall apart. The rebellion spread to universities, then schools and finally to factories, offices and even the oil industry. Widespread strikes paralyzed most government functions and large-scale desertions weakened the armed forces. In secret, Shah was **terminally ill**, but would not relinquish any real power to his hand picked governments or even the army generals. During the past 15 years of his despotic reign, every decision and action was so directly dictated by him, that the whole country fell into a state of convulsion, as he was being tormented by an incurable cancer and an implacable enemy.

Khomeini's resolve was unrelenting, even though his moderate aides were recommending a compromise to save the country from collapse. His single-minded utterance set the target: **'Shah must go'!** In early 1979, after Shah left the country for an extended 'vacation', neither his last liberal prime minister (Dr. Shahpor Bakhtiar an aide to Mosaddeg), nor his army generals, who were being coached by the Americans, could withstand Khomeini's return and the tsunami wave of popular uprising.

With the collapse of Shah's regime, like in other major revolutions, a frenzied rush to fill out the power vacuum started. Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamist alliance (loosely called the **Hezbollah**) quickly gained momentum and established itself both in the political arena

(through the Islamic Republic Party) and the military front (through the Revolutionary Guards). However, the first provisional government was assigned to the **liberal moderates** (led by Bazaargan, another Mosaddeq aide) who had decades of anti-Shah resistance credentials as well as technical and organizational experience.

The revolutionary **leftist groups** (most notably the Peoples Mujahidin and the Fedaiyan) were not trusted with any role in the new government, and were soon denounced by the Hezbollah, as infidels and apostates. The Hezbollah militants also started a systematic persecution of the previous regime's leaders and notables. Several hundred were executed, with thousands more jailed and tortured. The savage behaviour of Hezbollah rapidly alienated most of the educated middle class and the secular intellectuals, but invigorated the **lower classes** who enjoyed a measure of revenge, as well as material benefit from the confiscations and lootings.

Most leftist groups considered the liberal government as a transitional phase, before the radicalization of revolution would give them a chance to take over and turn the tide, as in the **Russian revolution** of 1917. Therefore, they started a frantic recruiting drive among the students, workers and the ethnic minorities, who were more susceptible to leftist propaganda. Their efforts quickly paid off in the Sunni Kurdistan region, where many police stations and army garrisons were ransacked, and an autonomous district was established. The ensuing savage civil war between the Hezbollah and the **Kurdistan** leftists antagonized the clerical leadership of Khomeini, who issued an all-out war edict against the 'infidels'. But the newly formed Revolutionary Guards were still too weak to defeat the Kurdish resistance.

A relevant reference: [Roots and Results of Revolution, by N. Keddie.](#)

## 14. Americans and the 1979 Revolution

Americans (with the help of the British) have been credited (or blamed) for bringing Shah back into power, in 1953. They also certainly had a dominant determining influence over the Shah's regime from that point until early 1970's. During the 1950's, almost half of Iran's budget and most of the army equipment were supplied through the **American aid** programs, as a way to prevent a collapse into the Soviet sphere. With the rising oil revenues in the 1960's, Iran became less and less dependant on that aid, and Shah turned from a timid US puppet, to a credible ally. The turning point came in 1971, when the Iran-Saudi axis was established in the Persian Gulf to fill the military vacuum left by the departing British forces.

The 1973 oil crisis propelled Shah into the world arena, as a very ambitious and exceedingly powerful leader. The power-balance pendulum worked so much to the Shah's advantage that in 1974, it was him paying cash to influence the outcome of the US presidential elections. Therefore, at the start of revolution, Shah was not an **American puppet**; and he was even on occasion standing up to them, and unduly interfering with their internal politics! This made the then new democrat president (Jimmy Carter) suspicious of the Shah. Carter initially weighed on the Shah to lower his military ambitions, respect human rights against political prisoners, and create a more "open political atmosphere". However, at the first signs of troubles in 1977, Carter abandoned all his reform-minded agenda, as he realized that Iran was not a country that US could afford to lose.

In early 1978, the direct US influence in Iran was minimal. Shah was completely in control, and would not even let the US intelligence agencies perform an independent evaluation and form an unbiased view of the internal political situation in Iran. Therefore, the misinformed US operatives in Iran did not take the opposition demonstrations seriously; as for example, their ambassador took the whole summer off! It was only during the massive student **demonstrations** in the fall of 1978 that the US embassy woke up to the depth and breadth of the Islamic outbreak. That rude awakening is evident in the ambassador's famous "thinking the unthinkable" memo to the president. There, he suggested

that the opposition action and strength had reached a critical-mass and could not be resisted by the Shah, even with full American support! The recommendation was to immediately open a channel of dialogue with the opposition leadership and plan for a working relationship with them, as they would be transitioning to power!

That memo almost cost the ambassador his job, as the president became furious at what he saw as a timid abandoning of a strategic ally. Problem was that Carter was not in Tehran to see things first hand, and know how everything had gone topsy-turvy, since his visit 10 months ago. Hence, the president directed his ambassador to forget about any talk with the opposition, and shore up as much support for the Shah as possible. Shah in turn was, by then, so depressed and afraid of the revolution that he asked for **direct guidance** from the Americans. That's when the Carter administration prepared the famous "options letter" for the Shah. There, instead of a clear direction, they outlined four alternative and divergent courses of action for the beleaguered monarch, ranging from a de-facto abdication to a bloody military coup. The Shah's reply showed his true personality weakness.

In times of hardship, everyone shows their true colors, and Shah's came out yellow; perhaps due to the tormenting cancer, perhaps due to the corrupting effect of 15 years of absolute power. He begged the Americans to give him one clear direction, and not a bunch of options. Carter's reply was that his majesty was the Shah of Iran and whichever of those options that he chose, US would fully support him! At that point, all first hand accounts point to the fact that Shah had completely turned paranoid and at the verge of a **nervous breakdown**. In his afflicted mind, the Americans and the British were taking revenge on him (for jacking up the oil prices) and wanted to get rid of him; as they had got rid of his father when he had become disobedient. Shah decided to go with what he thought was the American will, i.e. relinquishing power to a moderate prime minister and leaving for an extended vacation.

As a back-up plan, the Shah and Americans agreed to prepare for a bloody coup, which in case of the collapse of Bakhtiar government, could step in and take over the government and brutally suppress the

opposition. However, when an American general in charge of the operations came to Iran, he noticed that Shah had warned all the Iranian generals against cooperating with him. He also found that there was no coherent and cooperative **command structure** to the Iranian general staff, and every general was getting his direct commands from the Shah himself; often during one-on-one meetings and in total isolation from the other commanders! The only thing that the frightened Iranian generals kept repeating to the American agent was that, “do not allow Shah to leave; without him we will fall in a week!” Since the 1960’s, Shah had been so suspicious of a military coup that over the years, he had tied all the army generals, and decision making processes, directly to himself. Without him, the command structure collapsed like a house of cards.

Immediately after the collapse, the Americans severed all formal ties to the Pahlavi family and soon treated Mohammad Reza as **persona-non-grata**. Their mission in Tehran quickly recognized the new Islamic Republic and started to establish a working relationship with both the moderate and the Islamist fractions inside the government. That was, until a group of rightwing republicans petitioned the Carter administration, to obtain a medical visa for the ailing ex-Shah.

A good references: [All Fall Down, by G. Sick, 1985.](#)

## 15. When All Hell Broke Loose in Iran

Islamists tried to cancel the 1979 Nowruz celebrations, in order to maintain their unending cycle of mourning and fighting. The Hezbollah was determined to take over the entire government apparatus, expel the liberal technocrats from the ministries, crush the Kurdistan uprising, and **reinvigorate** the populace around their banner. However, their mindless repressive tactics (Chomaghdari) had alienated most political activists; and their lack-lustre fundamentalist slogans could not attract the vibrant young population.

Since his arrival, ayatollah Khomeini had not helped their cause either, as his Qom lectures were normally tedious and erratic. Some Hezbollah ‘ideologues’ decided that a new wave of political radicalism was required to rescue the mantle of **anti-imperialist** struggle from the leftist groups; topple the insufferably liberal government of Bazargan; and establish their religious hegemony (Velayat Faghieh) within the new constitution. That fall, the ex-Shah’s trip to US for emergency medical surgery, gave them a unique opportunity to attack the American embassy in Tehran and create what Khomeini later exalted as ‘a **second revolution** greater than the first’.

The first revolution of 1978 had dropped Iran from the ranks of internationally respected countries, but considering the critical importance of our oil fields, both the Americans and the Russians soon tried to normalize their relationship with the haphazard government of Tehran. However, the hostage taking at the American embassy rapidly dropped Iran from the ranks of the civilized nations, down to the level of a **rogue state**. At a tremendous cost to the country, the Hezbollah’s goals were achieved, when the liberal government of Bazargan immediately resigned and Khomeini was salvaged from the isolation of Qom, to rule as the new **absolute leader** from the Jamaran bastion in North Tehran.

The leftist groups readily fell for the Hezbollah ruse and fully supported the hostage fiasco. However, their key support base was soon eroded, as six months later; the Islamists prevailed in the universities and closed

them for three years of **Cultural Revolution**. Hezbollah's victory would have been complete, if it were not for a technicality (country of birth) that disqualified their candidate for the first presidential election. To their utter disappointment, a western educated liberal (Banisadr) became the first Iranian president.

Banisadr was soon confronted by the Hezbollah, who successfully blocked his every move towards establishing a functioning cabinet, and even violently attacked his staff and followers. Hezbollah also hindered any development on the American hostage issues, in order to further weaken the new president and influence the **new Majles** elections. Only after rigging the elections and months of painful trade and financial blockades, Khomeini agreed that the new Majles (not the president) could negotiate and ratify a deal over the hostage crisis. However, two weeks into negotiations with the American side, suddenly another maniac threw a wrench into the wicked Middle East machination.

Saddam Hussein had always hated the arrogant Persians! Shah's regime was a close ally of the deposed Iraqi monarch and a constant source of harassment to the new **Baath party**, which was almost toppled by a Savak engineered coup d'état in 1971. For years, Shah's army had activity provided arms, logistical support and even artillery coverage to the Iraqi Kurds uprising, which controlled the northern quarter of that country. Finally in 1975 Saddam bowed to Shah's demands regarding the border disputes and a truce was signed in Algeria. However, after the revolution, the religious zealots in Tehran started an active agitation campaign among the massive **Shia population** in Southern Iraq, in order to create another Islamic Republic in Baghdad. That of course did not sit well with the brutal leader of Iraq, who had ambitions of his own to 'liberate' the Arabic-speaking Khuzestan and teach another Qadessieh-type lesson to the Persians! Iraq's surprise attack on the Western Iranian plains, in the autumn of 1980, stunned an unprepared nation and a disheartened army.

Ever since the revolution, the Iranian army had been hit by several waves of bloody purges. Nevertheless, the army was still not trusted by the governing Islamists, as they were well aware of the anti-mullah sentiments among the rank-and-file. On the other hand, the newly



formed Revolutionary Guards were also unprepared to take on the well-equipped Iraqi army. Hence, two competing approaches emerged among the Iranian leadership, with president **Banisadr** advocating a systematic technical upgrade of the army, but the Hezbollah pushing for a massive poorly-armed militia (Basiej). A similar dispute raged through all aspects of government, where the liberal president supported the **technocratic** core (Motekhassin) to lead the ministries and industries. But the Hezbollah was pushing for a widespread purging of all the ‘non-believers’ and substituting them with a massive infusion of the unqualified **Islamists** (Moteahhedin). At the core of that dispute was the utter disdain of the Shia clergy and the ‘true believers’ for anyone who was not conforming to their version of Islam.

The dominant Shia clergies believed that without their absolute oversight, the laypeople were incapable of even washing their hands in the proper Islamic manner, let alone running an office, a factory or an army! In their view, **governance** was a god-given privilege of the twelve Shia Imams, which was ‘temporarily’ trusted to their loyal deputies, **the mullahs!** This dogma became the cornerstone of absolute-authority in Islamist Iran, which originated as a religious tenet from Khomeini’s writings. Hence, despite widespread popular support, the first liberal president of Iran faced a losing battle against the militant Hezbollah, who stonewalled him in the Majles. When Banisadr called for peaceful rallies by the ‘silent majority’, the Islamist militia viciously attacked his supporters in the streets of Tehran and other major cities, killing hundreds.

The Banisadr vs. Hezbollah power struggle came to a bloody climax in the summer of 1981. Most political groups were forced to take sides with either the short-lived liberal-left alliance (Banisadr and Mujahidin) or the repressive Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic Party. The ensuing street battles, bombings and terror attacks devolved into a year-long **bloody civil war**. It took Khomeini by surprise and hatred, when several hundred of his Islamist cadres were assassinated by the leftists. However, Hezbollah finally emerged as the undisputed victor by 1982, when the prisons were filled with tens of thousands of opposition activists, leftists and liberals who were routinely tortured and murdered, with such brutality that made the late Shah’s Savak look innocent!

After winning that terror-filled struggle, Hezbollah turned its attention towards recapturing the Kurdistan province from the rebels and defeating the Iraqi army. For several months in 1980, the Iraqi invasion had united most Iranians of all creeds and beliefs, who selflessly volunteered to stop Saddam's aggression. Even the Kurdistan fighting had subsided and the leftists were actively assisting the army. However, with the 1981/82 civil war, Iran's **Kurdistan** soon became a bloody killing field, which destroyed tens of thousands of lives and ruined entire towns and villages!

A relevant reference: [Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah, by B. Moin.](#)

## 16. Islamists Tyranny in the Land of Moderates

During the post revolutionary period of 1979-82, after fighting and eliminating most of the internal opposition; ayatollah Khomeini and his allied clergies established their **Islamist tyranny** over the entire Iranian political, military, financial, judicial, and cultural affairs. Since then, a puzzling Persian theocracy has plagued the Middle Eastern politics and become a prime source of emulation and support for most militant Islamists.

To consolidate their tyranny, lucrative industries, banks and major companies were confiscated and controlled by the Islamist instruments (Bonyads). The Iranian military was purged and then subjugated to the constant oversight and scrutiny of the **Revolutionary Guards**. All school teachers were investigated and purged based on their active obedience of the Shia Islam and adherence to Khomeini's edicts. Entire universities were closed for up to three years, in order to purge the secular professors and non-believing students. All the radio and television programs were reorganized and scripted to constantly instill revolutionary slogans, repetitive religious citations and tedious sermons into every hour of every day. In short, a **dark veil** of fundamentalist Islam descended over Iran, much like the overbearing and inhuman dictatorships of the Soviet Russia and the Maoist era China.

With absolute power in their hands, the Khomeini Hezbollah next set their aim at the **messianic** goal of defeating the enemies of true-Islam, one after the other, from Iraq to Israel and on to America. Arguably, to prepare the world for the return of the Shia messiah, Mahdi the hidden Imam! For the next six years, the whole country became a helpless source of material and human resource for Hezbollah's incredibly ambitious and fanatically idealistic **world-domination** experiment! However, even the 'first step' of toppling the Baath regime in Iraq proved an insurmountable task.

In 1982, using the human-wave tactic (reminiscent of the Communist methods during the Korean War) Iran's militia expelled the Iraqi army from all occupied territories. Then, the war changed from defending the Iranian territory to invading the Iraq proper. Relentless killing continued, despite the fact that as early as in 1983, the rich Arab countries of the Persian Gulf had agreed to provide a \$70 billion restitution fund to Iran, if Khomeini were to accept the **UN truce** resolution! When Khomeini refused, similar funds and more were instead made available to the Iraqi regime to pay for modern jets, tanks and chemical weapons, to stop the tsunami wave of Iranian militia. Five years later, Khomeini was forced by an Arab-American coalition to give up on his **maniacal ambitions**, and drink the 'poison of peace' in 1988. Tragically, he only relented after overseeing the mass annihilation of about one million Iranians and Iraqi's, and \$400 billion damage to the economy of both countries!

Meanwhile, the cruel treatment of civil war and political prisoners, and Hezbollah's inhuman regime of torture and terror, angered many Shia clergies. But upon protesting Khomeini's regime of death and destruction, even such high ranking Marjah like ayatollah Shariatmadari were condemned and banished. Astonishingly, even ayatollah Montazeri who for a decade was Khomeini's heir-apparent, was tormented and placed under house-arrest, when he compared **Khomeini's Savak** to that of the Shah and much worse.

Khomeini's angry retorts to all that criticism about tortures and human rights violations was that, 'the nameless soldiers of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam' were doing god's work in the prisons; and besides, those jailed criminals were not human to have any rights! Therefore, after the 1988 humiliating defeat in the hands of the Baath regime of Iraq and before succumbing to cancer, Khomeini ordered the mass execution of the remaining thousands of political prisoners across the country. That **demonic action** killed about 5,000 dissidents in a single week, which was more than the total number who had perished during the 53 years of Pahlavi dynasty!

With ayatollah Montazeri removed from the successor position and all the other senior clergies either against or unsympathetic towards the Islamic Republic's policies, Khomeini had **no Marjah successor**.

Hence, it became necessary for the governing clerical establishment to not only change Khomeini's political will and testament, but also change the whole constitution in a hurry! Essentially, the emphasis on the religious requirements for the lead mullah (Velayat Faghieh) was removed from the constitution, so that a **lesser clergy** (Khamenei) could occupy the top position. However, to seal the deal with the other strongman of the state, the office of prime minister was dissolved and most executive power was transferred to president Rafsanjani (1989-97).

The Khamenei-Rafsanjani diumvirate ruled over an exceedingly corrupt government, whose key players began to concentrate on looting and pillaging the country's wealth and resources. On the foreign policy arena, during the 1980's and 1990's the Islamist tyranny actively pursued a doctrine of **'exporting the revolution'** and hunting their overseas dissidents. That export translated into supporting a number of Islamist and terrorist groups in the Middle East; and that hunt resulted in the brutal murder of many prominent Iranians overseas, most notably the last Shah's liberal premier (Dr. Bakhtiar).

In their execution of Dr. Bakhtiar and others in Europe, Hezbollah not only used their typical brute-force tactics, but also abused their victims in such a horrific way (multiple stabbings and mutilations) to send a message to all the other opposition. Of course, that method was completely in line with **Khomeini's teachings**, who as early as in the 1940's had advocated the 'cutting of tongues and heads' of those who would dare talk or write against Islam or Shiaism! The savagery of those attacks completely isolated Iran, despite desperate efforts by some moderate officials.

The people's reaction to 20 years of murder and mayhem in Iran was a surprise vote during the presidential elections of 1997, when a moderate and liberal-minded candidate was mistakenly allowed to run. **Khatami** won the election with 70% of the vote, over a radical mullah who was the Majles speaker and the leader's choice! In response, the concerned Hezbollah unleashed their death-squads in Iran, and started a massive campaign of vicious assassinations, in order to nullify any opposition attempt at utilizing Khatami's victory. Their efforts resulted in a 'chain of murders' which created a power struggle between Khatami's

protesting supporters and the hardliners, who soon solidified around the ‘supreme leader’.

When the moderate vs. hardliner struggle came to a head, following a vicious Hezbollah attack on students’ dormitory in Tehran, Khatami was forced to back-off, and turned into a powerless figure-head for the rest of his presidency. Sadly, Khatami’s **capitulation** only strengthened Hezbollah’s resolve to regain all aspects of the ‘elected’ political power in Iran, including the Majles and the presidency, by 2005. All was done through shameless purging of the candidate lists, blatant vote rigging and brutal intimidation. The unelected (assigned) half of the government (judiciary, armed forces and supreme councils) as always, are ruled by the lead mullah’s henchmen.

Consequently in early 2009, all levels of government in Iran are completely dominated by the fanatical Hezbollah, who are preparing for their next battle with the ‘infidel’ world. With the added dimension of nuclear capabilities, the Islamist tyranny in Iran now poses the **greatest threat** to world peace. Puzzling enough, all that doom-and-gloom is despite the fact that an overwhelming majority (70%) of the Iranian population have consistently shown their allegiance to the democratic and peaceful principles, with utter resentment towards fanaticism.

A relevant reference: [The Persian Puzzle, by K. Pollack.](#)

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