
The Iran Primer

The Iran Primer

POWER, POLITICS, AND U.S. POLICY

Robin Wright, editor



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Iran (2010 population: 74.5 million)

Ethnic divisions

Persian – 51 percent
 Azeri – 24 percent
 Gilaki and Mazandarani – 8 percent
 Kurd – 7 percent
 Arab – 3 percent
 Lur – 2 percent
 Baloch – 2 percent
 Turkmen – 2 percent
 Other – 1 percent

Religious divisions¹

Muslims – 98 percent
 Shiite – 89 percent
 Sunni – 9 percent
 Other significant minorities—based on varying estimates:
 Baha'i – 300,000 to 350,000
 Jews – 20,000 to 30,000
 Christians (mainly Assyrian and Armenian churches) – 300,000
 Zoroastrians – 35,000 to 60,000

Land borders

Afghanistan – 585 miles
 Armenia – 22 miles
 Azerbaijan – Naxcivan exclave – 112 miles
 Azerbaijan – 270 miles
 Iraq – 911 miles
 Pakistan – 568 miles
 Turkmenistan – 620 miles
 Turkey – 312 miles

Bordering bodies of water

Caspian Sea – 462 miles
 Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman – 1,525 miles

1. According to U.S. State Department's "International Religious Freedom Report 2006."

Editor's Note

Robin Wright

This book is truly the combined effort of 50 seasoned experts on Iran as well as a handful of rising young talent. Each of the authors volunteered time and expertise in a joint effort to provide hard information, thoughtful analysis and historic context about one of the world's most intriguing countries.

The timing is deliberate. Iran has always been an important geo-strategic country. Since its 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic has been an ever-increasing challenge for the West to understand and to engage. But Tehran's controversial nuclear program, disputed 2009 election, growing violations of basic human rights, and angry rhetoric have generated deeper hostilities with the outside world than at any time since the revolution's early days. The stakes—and consequences—are greater than ever.

This collection explores 50 different aspects of Iranian politics, the economy, the military, the nuclear program and foreign relations. It chronicles U.S.-Iran relations under six American presidents. And it probes the West's five options in dealing with Iran in the future.

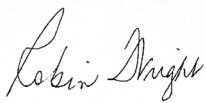
The project's goal was to be widely inclusive of the broad range of talent from many think tanks and universities around the world. This volume has no political agenda and no single political perspective. It draws on experts with a wide range of views. It also includes as many Iranian voices as Western authors to ensure the book is sensitive to both sides of the issues.

Many people made this project possible. At the United States Institute of Peace, Board Chairman J. Robinson West and President Richard Solomon were enthusiastic supporters of the concept from the outset. They were also extremely generous in providing the resources to publish this book. At the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, President Lee Hamilton and Executive Vice President Mike van Dusen eagerly agreed to co-sponsor it.

Two women facilitated this project in so many ways. USIP Executive Vice President Tara Sonenshine's endless energy and enthusiasm made it possible to turn this book around in just three months. And Haleh Esfandiari, director of the WWC Middle East Program, was a font of sage counsel and expertise who checked every chapter. Both mentored this project from the outset.

The United States Institute of Peace managed to break records in getting this book out. The project was conceived in July and put to bed in September—with one editor and two (supposedly) part-time assistants who ended up working around the clock. Rachel Brandenburg deserves enormous credit. She is an extraordinary talent with infinite patience and good cheer who managed 54 writers from around the world, coordinated with production, double-checked editing, and worked late into many nights. Semira Nikou was an outstanding assistant who slaved long hours over Iranian history to assemble four detailed chronologies on Iranian politics, nuclear program, foreign relations and the military history since the 1979 revolution.

Chantal De Jonge Oudraat and Shira Lowinger of the USIP Randolph Jennings Fellowships provided support and constant encouragement. The USIP production team also crashed to get this book out quickly. All credit goes to Valerie Norville, Marie Marr Jackson, Kay Hechler and Christian Feuerstein. Last but far from least, Richard von Zimmer produced this gorgeous cover.



Robin Wright
Washington, D.C.
September 2010

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The Challenge of Iran

Robin Wright

Iran, proud and passionate, has been a conundrum since its 1979 revolution. It stunned the world by introducing Islam as a form of modern governance, in turn altering the balance of power across the Middle East. It rattled the region by exporting its zealous ideology and siring or sponsoring militant allies elsewhere. And it unnerved both East and West by defiantly challenging international norms and charting its own course. All three factors complicated dealing with the Islamic Republic. But Iran looms even larger today. The confluence of challenges—defiance over its nuclear program, rising repression, support for extremists, and menacing rhetoric—has created a sense of impending crisis both at home and abroad.

Political volatility at home was reflected in six months of tumultuous protests after the disputed 2009 presidential election. For millions of Iranians in many cities, the issue quickly escalated from alleged voter fraud to condemnation of the regime, its leadership and even the Islamic system. The regime, briefly, appeared on a precipice. Tehran eventually restored control. But its tactics indicated the regime's insecurity. It had to militarize to survive.

Tensions with the international community have been reflected in a series of U.N. sanctions since 2006 over Iran's refusal to convince the world it was not building a bomb. In the end, even Russia, which built Iran's first nuclear reactor, voted for a series of punitive sanctions. So did China, which has become Iran's most important big-power trading partner.

Iran now represents a far more complex challenge than other hotspots—Afghanistan, Iraq and North Korea—for several reasons:

- Its revolution was one of the three transformative events in the Middle East in the 20th century. Iran's actions will be pivotal to global events in the early 21st century because of its resources, ideology, weaponry, allies and location.
- Strategically, Iran's frontiers and coastline have for millennia been central to political, military and commercial developments. Today, it spans three of the world's most volatile regions and its most vital shipping lanes for oil. Iran has the potential to help stabilize or destabilize all four.
- Politically, Iran has been the most dynamic and controversial experiment in blending Islam and democracy—and the experiment is far from over. It continues to play out in the domestic political crisis. The outcome could affect the wider Islamic world as profoundly as the revolution.
- Militarily, Iran has the largest armed forces in the Middle East and, with the exception of Israel, Egypt and increasingly Saudi Arabia, the largest arsenal, although much of its weaponry is of low quality, aging or obsolete. It has also armed militant allies from Lebanon to Afghanistan.
- Economically, Iran is one of the world's largest and most valuable properties, rich with oil and natural gas. Its assets in turn give it leverage and political leeway globally.

The revolution

The Islamic Republic still has to prove the long-term viability of its zealous ideology and hybrid political system, the issues at the heart of its domestic crisis. Yet Iran's 1979 revolution was clearly one of the three most innovative revolutions of the Modern Age. Like two other upheavals, it introduced a new ideology and redefined the world's political spectrum.

In toppling the Bourbon monarchy, the French revolution introduced equality and civil liberty as the basis of modern democracy. The Russian revolution overthrew the Romanov dynasty in the name of classless egalitarianism, the foundation of communism. By ousting the last in a string of dynasties dating back more than 2,000 years, the Iranian revolution sought to demonstrate that Islam was an effective idiom of political expression, opposition and governance.

For the Middle East, the revolution was one of the three most important turning points of the 20th century. The collapse of the five-century-old Ottoman Empire after World War I and Israel's creation in 1948 were the other two. In many ways, Iran was a logical place for sweeping political innovation because of its own rich history, religious tenets, two earlier attempts at reform, and struggle to end foreign influence.

Historically, Iran has more independent political experience than virtually any other modern Muslim state. Most were created or gained independence from European colonial powers only in the 20th century. But Iran had a long, if somewhat varied, history of sovereignty. Persia also had long exposure to ideas from the outside world, as a crossroads between East and West and a target of invading armies from ancient Greece to contemporary Britain. And with more than five millennia of civilization, Iranians have a sense of historic importance and a role in shaping the world.

Political Islam

Shiite Islam was also a logical force for change. In Sunni Islam, clerics are advisers; a believer's relationship with God is direct. In Shiite Islam, the clergy is empowered to interpret God's word for the faithful. Their fatwas have absolute authority in telling a believer what is right or wrong, what to do or not do. Shiite clerics also have a leadership hierarchy. And central to the original schism, Shiite Islam demands that the faithful fight against injustice, even if it means certain death. In tapping into strong Shiite traditions, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the most credible authority to mobilize disparate Iranian factions against the last shah.

Islam also provided a framework for an alternative to the monarchy. The new Islamic Republic was the first grand experiment in blending Islam and democracy. Iran's 1979 constitution borrowed heavily from French and Belgian law. It called for separation of powers between the three branches of government. It stipulated that the president and legislature, as well as provincial and local councils, should be popularly elected by men and women, originally as young as 15. It imposed a two-term limit on the presidency. And it continued the monarchy's practice of allocating seats in parliament for Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians—at least token acknowledgement of individual or minority rights.

But the constitution then added a provision that all laws must be compatible with Islamic law, or Sharia. It also established a set of parallel Islamic institutions that mirrored each of the republican branches of government—and often had more power. And on top of it all, the constitution imposed a supreme leader, who had absolute powers. The supreme leader became the equivalent of an infallible political pope.

Revolution within Shiism

The Islamic republic also represented a revolution within Shiism. More than any branch of Islam, Shiites historically were wary of political power. They viewed the state as imperfect, corruptible and a source of persecution. They deliberately distanced themselves from politics. After Iran's revolution, however, they became the political power, changing the role of the clerics as well a central tenet of the "quietist" Shiite faith. Tehran's Shiite theocracy is the only time Muslim clerics have ever ruled a state.

Iran has in turn put Shiism—Islam's so-called second sect, making up between 10 percent and 12 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims—on the political map. In its first three decades, the Islamic Republic fostered a network of Shiite allies in neighboring states stretching from Lebanon to Afghanistan. Sunni governments began to fear the so-called Shiite crescent, anchored by Iran, that stretched west across Iraq, into Syria and Lebanon, and south through Shiite minorities in the oil-rich sheikhdoms.

Political phases

Iran's revolution has passed through at least four phases:

Phase one: The first phase was the Khomeini decade from 1979 until the ayatollah's death in 1989. It was a tumultuous period of revolutionary extremes that included killing off supporters of the *ancien regime*, taking foreigners hostage, and fostering its zealotry across the Islamic world. The turmoil was exacerbated by an eight-year war with Iraq that proved to be the Middle East's bloodiest modern conflict. It produced more than one million casualties.

Phase two: The second phase coincided with the two terms of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, from 1989 until 1997. The revolution's early passions were replaced by a hard-earned pragmatism, produced in part by excesses that backfired against the clerics and exhausted the population. Under Rafsanjani, arrogance gave way to a conservative realism. The government of God increasingly ceded to secular statecraft.

Phase three: The third phase between 1997 and 2005 coincided with the reformist era of President Mohammad Khatami, a dark horse former cabinet minister who tapped into the groundswell of interest in political openings. The government soon improved relations with its own people as well as the outside world. Iran had, temporarily, a freer press, freer speech, wider debate, relaxed social restrictions and a burgeoning civil society. But parliament failed to legislate reforms. And by the end of Khatami's two terms, a political schism had developed between the regime headed by the supreme leader and the government headed by the president.

Phase four: The fourth phase began in 2005 with the upset election of the little-known mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over Rafsanjani. The emergence of hardliners reflected three broader shifts: Disillusionment with politics led many, especially young Iranians and women, to boycott the poll. Public anger swelled against the clergy, especially Rafsanjani, for corruption and failing to improve the average Iranian's life in a quarter century. And a second generation of revolutionaries hardened by the Iran-Iraq War, largely laymen, began to challenge the clerics who ended the monarchy.

Domestic crisis

Through each phase, Iranian politics increasingly splintered. In the early 1980s, Iran was a virtual one-party state. The Islamic Republic Party dominated all branches of government. But the infighting quickly became so serious that Khomeini publicly rebuked its officials, "Stop biting one another like scorpions." The divisions became a chasm; the party was dissolved in 1987.

Three decades later, Iran had more than 200 parties, factions and political groups—many of them still squabbling. A common political axiom in Tehran joked: "Where there are five Iranian Shiites, there are six political factions."

The depth of the divide among the original revolutionaries was witnessed after the 2009 presidential election. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the prime minister who led Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq War, charged the regime with massive fraud in his loss to Ahmadinejad. He also warned that it was turning into a dictatorship—the dictator being Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who as president had been his colleague in running the government during the 1980s.

The post-election protests were the biggest threat to the regime since the revolution. Beyond the immediate election issue, they reflected the degree of public daring, the diversity of political thought, and the growing unease about the system, even among those inside it. And the internal turmoil did not end with the regime's crackdown. The splintering continued, as conservatives began to turn on Ahmadinejad's core of hardliners for abuse of power.

People power

The more dynamic part of the domestic crisis, however, was the spontaneous display of people power. Since the mid-1990s, the Iranian public—rather than any specific politician—had spurred the movement for political change. It was always an amorphous, leaderless body in search of a head that tapped into the limited number of candidate choices allowed to run after vetting by the Guardian Council. The embryonic reform movement first put Mohammad Khatami into the presidency in 1997 and then turned to Mousavi in 2009. Both men were adopted by the movement; neither was the original inspiration for reform.

The demonstrations were in some ways a logical next step in a longstanding debate over Iran's political system. After the shah's ouster, the revolutionaries were divided between ideologues and realists on the shape of a new government. Ideologues argued that the first modern theocracy should be a "redeemer state" championing the cause of the world's oppressed; restoring Islamic purity and rule in the 57-nation Islamic world; and creating a new Islamic bloc to defy both East and West. Realists argued that Iran should seek legitimacy by creating a capable Islamic state and institutionalizing the revolution. They, too, wanted a new political and social order independent of the outside world, but they also wanted to be realistic about Iran's need to interact economically and diplomatically with the world.

For 30 years, the bottom line issue had been variations on the same theme: whether to give priority to the revolution or to the state. Put another way: whether the Islamic Republic is first and foremost Islamic or a republic. The same theme had played out in the 2009 election. Ahmadinejad championed the revolutionary clerics' original vision of helping the oppressed, while Mousavi campaigned on the need for a viable and practical state. The same issues were also central to the post-election turmoil. Mousavi warned that the alleged vote-rigging was killing the idea that Islam and republicanism were compatible.

In 2009, the public became immersed in the debate too—first by turning out to vote and then in protesting alleged fraud. The newly named Green Movement also launched the most imaginative civil disobedience campaign in the Islamic world. It included a commercial boycott of goods advertised on state-controlled television. It featured anti-regime slogans and caricatures printed on the national currency—from a green V to signify the Green Movement’s election victory to a stamped picture of Ahmadinejad with the caption “people’s enemy.” And it painted imaginative graffiti—usually in green—on public walls, the back of buses, bridge underpasses, university buildings and fences.

The public political energy was admired among reformers in other Muslim countries, including Sunni societies that had disdained the revolution or distanced themselves from Shiite Iran. Despite the government crackdown, the sheer magnitude of participation assured that the debate started shortly after the revolution was still far from over.

Fear of foreigners

Historically, many of Iran’s most tumultuous times have been caused by foreign invasions, meddling or influence. From the Persian prism, the showdown with the outside world in the 21st century is only the latest round. Long experience has bred deep suspicion and xenophobia.

Ancient Persia was pivotal to Alexander the Great’s drive into India in the 4th century B.C. Its conquest by Arab armies in the 7th century gave the then new Islamic Empire access to central and eastern Asia. Persia was invaded by Turks in the 11th, 16th and 18th centuries. It was conquered by Genghis Khan’s Mongol army in the 13th century and by Tamerlane in the 14th century. The Safavid dynasty actually converted to Shiism in the 16th century—some 900 years after Shiism’s birth in Islam’s great schism—to create a separate identity and prevent the encroachment of Sunnis in the neighboring Ottoman Empire. Persia was then challenged by the Afghans in the 18th century.

In the 20th century, Iran was occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union. The Persian Corridor was also the most viable supply route for U.S. Lend Lease aid to the Soviet Union during World War II. Some 40,000 American soldiers were deployed in Iran to keep the train link open. After the war, Iran was the first crisis of the new United Nations when the Soviets refused to leave. In 1946, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution calling on Moscow to pull-out its forces from northern Iran. President Harry Truman’s ultimatum to Joseph Stalin on Iran spawned a new U.S.-Iran friendship that steadily deepened until the revolution. But the subsequent Cold War arguably also had its origins in this confrontation.

Rejecting encroachment

The fight against foreign influence has also been central to the Iranian campaign for empowerment over the past century. The 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution erupted after the monarchy doled out political and economic concessions to Britain and Russia. The backlash sparked prolonged instability and forced the Qajar dynasty in 1906 to accept demands for a constitution and parliament, both of which limited the king’s powers. Iran had only the second constitution and parliament in Asia, after the Ottoman Empire. The first round of political reforms ended when an army colonel seized power in 1925, crowned himself Persia’s new king, took the name Pahlavi, changed the country’s name to Iran, and launched rapid modernization. He was forced to abdicate for pro-Nazi sentiments in 1941.

In 1953, Iran went through a second burst of democratic activism. An elected government led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh challenged the second and last Pahlavi shah, who was also heavily influenced by foreign powers. Mossadegh’s four-party coalition advocated constitutional democracy and limited powers for the monarchy. It also wanted to nationalize Iranian oil after the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company refused a 50-50 profit-sharing deal. The shah’s attempt to have Mossadegh dismissed backfired; the backlash forced the monarch to flee to Rome. Foreign powers restored the monarchy. The CIA and British intelligence orchestrated riots that forced Mossadegh to resign and allowed the young king to return to the Peacock Throne for another quarter century.

In many ways, the 1979 revolution was an extension of the two earlier challenges. In the 21st century, the struggle against foreign influence still defines Iran’s current stand-off with the world. When the outside world today calls for cooperation, many Iranians see it as an attempt to co-opt or coerce them into conformity—to Western ways, morals and influence.

U.S. relations

Since the revolution, Iran's showdown with the world has pivoted most of all on the United States. The shah's ouster transformed a country that for three decades had been one of two pillars —along with Israel—of U.S. policy in the Middle East. After the United States took in the ailing shah, Tehran began to view Washington as the ultimate enemy. The revolutionaries suspected another CIA plot to put the monarch back on the throne.

Defying international law, Iranian students responded by seizing the U.S. Embassy in a drama that dragged out for 444 days. The ordeal of 52 American hostages was largely responsible for ending the presidency of Jimmy Carter after one term. In the mid-1980s, Iran's double-dealing during the covert arms-for-hostage swap—in which Iran helped free three American hostages in Lebanon, only to have three more picked up—was the biggest scandal for the Reagan administration. Iran has been a consistent thorn for all six American presidents who tried to figure out how to deal with Tehran.

The two sides shouted at each other. In 1979, Iran dubbed the United States the "Great Satan." In 2002, the Bush administration called Iran part of an "axis of evil." Both countries occasionally tried outreach, although they were never on the same page at the same time. Their counterparts often suspected that the other would not or could not deliver; opportunities to at least explore rapprochement were missed. The most significant effort by Iran was President Khatami's call to bring down "the wall of mistrust." But it went largely unheeded in Washington until it was too late to salvage the effort.

American presidents also singled out Iran for mention in important speeches. In his 1989 inaugural address, President George H.W. Bush offered "new engagement" to the world, but made a special offer to Iran. "There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands, and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Good will begets good will. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on."

After the announcement of his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, President Obama said it had to be "shared with everyone who strives for justice and dignity — for the young woman who marches silently in the streets on behalf of her right to be heard even in the face of beatings and bullets." He did not name her, but Iranians knew he was referring to Neda Agha Soltan, the aspiring 26-year-old musician who was shot on a Tehran street during the 2009 election protests. The cell phone video capturing her bloodied death was transmitted around the world.

By the end of 2010, tensions between Washington and Tehran had reached new heights because of suspicions about Iran's long-term nuclear intentions, support for Iraqi and Afghan militias targeting U.S. troops, Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and Israel's right to exist, and human rights abuses.

Nationalism

Tehran's policies and world perspective today are also rooted in a past rich with accomplishments. Iranians are notoriously proud, as is their right. Persia produced some of history's greatest scientists, physicians, astronomers, mathematicians, philosophers, architects, artists and poets. Iranians believe their contributions are not over—if only the outside world will give them a chance.

Zoroaster founded the first monotheistic religion, which introduced the ideas of good and evil and a day of judgment even before Judaism. Avicenna, or Ibn Sina, was an 11th century philosopher and physician whose medical texts were taught in Europe until the 17th century. A crater on the moon is named after him. In the 11th century, Omar Khayyam was one of the world's leading mathematicians and astronomers as well as a poet famed for more than 1,000 quatrain verses. Rumi, a 13th century philosopher, is the world's most popular poet in the 21st century. Hafez, Saadi, and Ferdowsi were other great medieval poets whose works are still admired today. The list goes on and on.

Iran's intellectual culture has been evident even in the current political infighting. Some of the most modern and democratic ideas in the Islamic world today have emerged among Iranian philosophers, reformers and dissidents. Iranian philosopher Abdulkarim Soroush was the intellectual father of the reform movement. A former revolutionary, he turned on the regime. In the mid-1990s, he began to challenge the theological justification for a supreme leader and called for separation of mosque and state. He also declared that freedom always had precedence over religion, because Muslims could only be true believers if they embraced the faith with their own free will.

Given their past, Iranians see only greatness in their future; they view their current status as only a blip on the screen of history. The quest for nuclear energy, which dates back to the shah, is viewed as a key to modern development. For many ordinary Iranians, the right to enrich uranium to fuel nuclear reactors is first and

foremost an issue of sovereignty. As they modernize, they want to avoid any further dependence on the outside world. To understand Iranian nationalism, think of a proud, chauvinistic Texan—then add 5,000 years.

Strategic value

The outside world has always valued Iran because of its location. Today, no nation can afford to ignore Iran, regardless of who is in power, for several reasons:

- It holds some 10 percent of the world's oil reserves. Iran is OPEC's second largest oil producer. It also has the world's second largest reserves of natural gas.
- Iran's vast resources provide enormous leverage in an oil-hungry world. Since World War II, petroleum has been essential to the movement of modern armies and for development of modern industry. Free access to oil has also been essential to both political and economic power.
- Iran's geo-strategic location bridges the world's most volatile blocs of countries—the Middle East to the west, the Asian subcontinent to the east, and the Caucasus and Central Asia to the north. Peaceful relations with Iran are pivotal to the stability of more than one dozen countries.
- Iran's position and the traditions of its Aryan people, the Indo-European race whence Iran gets its name, have long made Iran the crossroads of culture and geography.
- Iran's population is now among the world's top twenty. In the first decade after the revolution, it almost doubled from 34 to 62 million when the clerics called on Iranian women to breed an Islamic generation.

Neighborhood geography

Iran stands apart geographically because of two great mountain ranges, the Alborz and the Zagros, and three great bodies of water, the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In terms of territory,

- Iran is roughly one-fifth the size of the United States.
- It ranks 18th among the world's nations in geographic mass.
- Neighboring Afghanistan, by comparison, is 41st.
- Neighboring Iraq is 58th.
- Iran is more than twice as large and twice as populated as both countries.

Iran's nine other frontiers are important for more than trade and transit.

Iraq: To the West, Iran's 910-mile border with Iraq is an entry point into the Arab world's Fertile Crescent.

Turkey: To the northwest, Iran shares a 312-mile border with Turkey, a vital member of NATO.

Afghanistan: To the east, Iran shares a 585-mile border with Afghanistan; the two countries share one of the world's most active routes for trafficking narcotics.

Pakistan: To the southeast is the 570-mile border with Pakistan. The father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb provided pivotal equipment to Tehran.

Gulf states: Iran's frontier along the Persian Gulf, through which more than 40 percent of the West's oil passes daily, is the longest of the six countries that rim the strategic waterway. Iran effectively controls the Strait of Hormuz, the so-called chokepoint for Gulf oil exports.

Turkmenistan: To the north, Iran has a 620-mile border with the former Soviet republic, the most autocratic of the Central Asian nations.

Azerbaijan: To the north, Iran shares a 270-mile border with Azerbaijan. About one quarter of Iran's population is ethnic Azeri.

Armenia: To the north, Iran's smallest frontier is the 22-mile border with Armenia. Armenians are among the Christian minorities represented by specially allocated seats for Christians in Iran's parliament.

Azerbaijan-Nakhchivan exclave: To the north, Iran shares a 112-mile border.

Ethnically, Iran is also a geographic crossroad mirroring most of its neighbors. Only 51 percent of Iranians are pure Persians. The rest are Azeris in the northwest and Turkoman in the northeast. Kurds live along the western border with Iraq. Baluchis (or "wanderers") straddle the arid and unruly southeast border with Pakistan. Arabs live on the southern coast. The Lors, an Arab-Persian mix, live mainly in the mountains, while nomadic herding tribes live in the south.

The future

- In the 21st century, Iran's unique version of God's government must prove its viability on earth—and that it can deliver what its people want—or risk the same fate as other utopian ideologies.
- No Islamic country is likely to replicate the Iranian experience. The costs are too high, the results too controversial. The Shiite character of the revolution also makes it unlikely to be repeated among Sunni-dominated societies.
- Yet Iran's Shiite alliance remains a major power bloc capable of heavily influencing the outcome of elections and conflicts—and sparking tensions with Sunni communities.
- Iran's resources create a huge cushion against punitive actions such as economic sanctions. In an oil-hungry world, they also undermine international cooperation.
- Iran's labyrinthine political system—and competing sources of power—complicate all forms of diplomacy. Engagement, especially with the United States, has become a domestic political issue—unrelated to the merits of rapprochement.

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