

Kenneth M. Pollack

THE
PERSIAN
PUZZLE

*The Conflict Between
Iran and America*



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*For Aidan,
my brand-new reason for caring about
what the world is like tomorrow*

Foreword

STROBE TALBOTT

This book is the latest evidence of Ken Pollack's impeccable sense of timing. Two years ago, in October 2002, as the Bush administration was focusing the world's attention on the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein, Ken's best-selling *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* appeared. It argued both for decisive use of force and for a strategy to win the peace that would follow a military victory.

Now Iran is increasingly the focus of international attention—and, with *The Persian Puzzle*, of Ken's incisive analysis and hardheaded policy prescription as well. He brings to the task his own twelve-year experience at the CIA and the National Security Council and a year of scholarly research. With nearly four times the territory and three times the population of Iraq, Iran has two and a half millennia of distinctive culture. "Contained in that history," Ken writes, "are all of the elements of our current impasse. Most Iranians know that history—or some warped version of it—too well. Most Americans know it too little."

The memory of centuries of foreign manipulation and interference is a constant factor in the foreign and domestic policy of modern Iran—and part of the reason that modernity itself is a source of deep ambivalence. The "Great Game" that Russia and Britain played for control over Central Asia in the nineteenth century left scars on generations of Iranian leaders and deeply instilled a determination to insulate Iran against foreign influence. When America came into its own as a global power after World War II, Iranians, for a brief moment, saw the United States as a protector against Soviet and British

infringements. But when the CIA masterminded a coup against a nationalist prime minister and reinstated the shah on the Peacock Throne, Iranians, writes Ken, went back to "believing that the United States had the ability (and the desire) to control their destinies even when we did not."

American interest in Iran during the Cold War was episodic. Washington looked at the country through two lenses: competition with the Soviet Union and the economics of oil. Both were important considerations, but neither induced the United States to give priority to the study of Iran as such. The American desire for a strong and oil-rich partner in the Middle East led a series of U.S. administrations largely to look the other way while the opulence and corruption of the shah's rule fed popular resentments that would eventually lead to an explosion.

The backlash came with the Islamist Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. Besides overthrowing the U.S.-friendly shah, the ayatollah's followers promptly took American diplomats in Tehran hostage for fourteen months, but with consequences for the U.S.-Iran relationship that would last much longer. Khomeini and the mullahs went on to impose a radical ideology on the population and sponsored terrorism against Israel and the United States. It was one of the many ironies of the period that after the revolution Saddam Hussein became, as Franklin Roosevelt might have put it, "our son of a bitch" in the Gulf region. The Reagan administration backed him in the long and brutal war he fought against Iran—including the use of poison gas against Kurdish villages and Iranian troops.

Ken argues that the long-standing Iranian fear of the outside world may have lessened somewhat over the past twenty-five years. One reason is that the population has come to blame the obscurantist Islamic clerics who rule them, not foreign powers, for failing to fix the country's economic woes and for imposing political oppression and creating social ills.

But while the people of Iran, especially the younger generation, may want to see their country open up to the world, the hard-liners who are still very much in charge continue to harbor al-Qa'eda operatives and pursue a clandestine nuclear program. Ken shuns simple answers and sifts the evidence in search of the grittier truth that will be useful to policy makers and an informed public. He offers a diplomatic way forward. It features a coordinated U.S.-European pursuit of a deal with Iran on its nuclear ambitions.

In its timeliness, its trenchancy, and its solid grounding in nonpartisan, objective research, Ken's book is a model of what we try to do at Brookings and how we do it. It is also typical of the work that goes on week in and week out at our Saban Center for Middle East Policy, established through the generosity of our trustee, Haim Saban, and led by its director, Martin Indyk. Ken is direc-

tor of research at the Saban Center. He and Martin have made it, over the past two years since its founding, the go-to source for members of the policy community, the press, and the public interested in the best analysis of the Middle East.

Having made this contribution to making sense of *The Persian Puzzle*, Ken has thrown himself into helping solve the even larger one of the greater Middle East.

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Iran and Neighboring States

Introduction: The Persistence of Memory

Persia. The name alone conjures images of the exotic. Veiled women. Strange spices. Labyrinthine bazaars. Men selling ornate carpets. For some, the name may still evoke an antique land. The great kings Darius and Xerxes, or Cyrus before them. The battles of Salamis and Marathon, where our Greek forebears (or so we describe them) faced down the vast armies of Asia marching under the banners of the king of kings of Persia.

Iran. For Americans, that name brings to mind very different images. Mad ayatollahs blaming all of the ills of the world on the "Great Satan." Hostage takers. Terrorists. Our prime adversary in the Persian Gulf for the past twenty-five years. It is also a name that, for many Americans, symbolizes frustration. The familiar refrain "Why do they hate us so much?" was being asked by Americans about Iranians long before the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Iran's motives, its politics, and its policies are often a source of utter confusion for many Americans.

Let me add two points that might ease some of that anguished perplexity: first, although they often refuse to acknowledge it, most Iranians are equally confused and ignorant about the United States. Second, Iranians themselves are often hard pressed to explain their country's actions.

The only way to understand the twenty-five-year confrontation between Iran and the United States is to know the history of the relationship. Contained in that history are all of the elements of our current impasse. Most Iranians know that history—or some warped version of it—too well. Most Americans

know it too little. To a certain extent, that is the first of many profound differences that lie at the heart of our belligerent stand-off.

Although the recent past is of greatest relevance to the near future, when dealing with a nation such as Iran, there is no escaping its more distant past. Nor is it possible to understand the roots of Iran's rage at the United States without knowing a bit about the origins of our affiliation, and the ups and downs it followed during the latter half of the twentieth century. Much of the ferocious hatred each side reserves for the other was born from the pain each has felt at different times when they believed they had been betrayed—jilted may be a more appropriate term—by the other.

The importance of unraveling that history lies at the heart of understanding the choices that we, the United States, have to move forward with Iran—whether in friendship or in continued anger. Anyone who cannot master that history, cannot understand how to move beyond it.

Problems and Possibilities

Over the past twenty-five years it has become something of a commonplace for Americans writing about Iran to begin their books by arguing that Iran is an important country in an important part of the world and therefore critical to American trade and diplomacy; that the history of Iranian-American animosity was a tragedy that could have and should have been avoided; and that the continuing confrontation was mostly the doing of small groups of benighted extremists on both sides.

That is not my starting point. While I do not disagree that Iran is an important country in an important part of the world, and I believe that it would be nice if the two countries had better relations, I approach the topic of Iranian-American relations from the perspective that there are fundamental differences that lie at the root of our confrontation. The United States has some very important problems with the Iranians (and they have some very important problems with us). My reason for writing this book is not to plead for greater compassion for either side but to explain the origins of these problems and examine how best to address them. I like most of the Iranians I have met, I think that most Iranians want a better relationship with the United States, and I think that we would benefit from a warmer relationship with their country. But I will say very bluntly that I don't think the United States "needs" Iran; we have been isolated from Iran for twenty-five years and in that time have experienced the most extraordinary economic prosperity in our history, coupled with strategic developments that have made the United States the most power-

ful nation the world has ever seen. Clearly, the lack of a warm relationship with Iran has not exactly held us back.

The same cannot be said for the Iranians. They have not fared particularly well over the past twenty-five years. They are not destitute, but their economy is hobbled. They are not quite international pariahs, but they have an unsavory reputation that follows them wherever they go. In her most recent book on Iran, Robin Wright quotes an Iranian shoe salesman turned bus driver lamenting, "Now we're treated as outcasts. Few foreigners come here anymore, and it's almost impossible for ordinary Iranians to get visas to go abroad. We'd probably be all alone if it weren't for our oil." Nor have Iranians been able to realize anything like the kind of prosperity or status that their geostrategic position, natural resources, and national endowments ought to afford them. In part for that reason, many (probably most) Iranians are eager for improved ties with the United States—at least in the abstract. What stands between us and them is a sea of troubles.

It is not necessarily that this sea is wide, but it is very deep and it seems to be forever storm-swept. One can tick off America's problems with Iran on one hand: support for terrorism, pursuit of nuclear weapons, opposition to the Middle East peace process, undermining of regional stability, and a poor human rights record. But none of these issues is easily dismissed and each one is a tangle. That tangle consists of decades of accumulated psychological scar tissue. The United States and Iran have a relatively brief (as historians tend to measure things) but terribly involved history. Like former lovers who went through a messy divorce, we have a lot of "issues."

One of the principal themes of this book is not just that understanding the history of U.S.-Iranian relations is absolutely essential to appreciate the nature of the problems we currently confront, but that the imbalance in historical knowledge is also part of the problem. Americans are serial amnesiacs; as a nation, we forget what we have done almost immediately after doing it. We often hold grudges, but we just as often can't remember why. We are mostly a forward-thinking and future-oriented people, and we tend to ignore the past for the sake of concentrating on the future—"let's not dwell on the past" and "water under the bridge" are characteristically American expressions. Many Americans know almost nothing about the sources of Iranian grievance against the United States, where our own grudge against Tehran came from, and why the two sides have found it so difficult to overcome their differences.

Unfortunately, that very ignorance contributes to the difficulty of addressing our current problems with Iran. It allows extremists on both sides of the political spectrum to suggest that easy solutions are available to our problems

if we would just embrace them. And because most Americans do not understand the complexities of the relationship and the depths of the confrontation, they can be easily swayed by these siren songs.

This raises the second principal theme of this book: there are no easy answers to our problems with Tehran. It may sound strange to say this given the problems the United States has faced in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but in both of those cases there was a simple and straightforward option to address the problems created by Saddam Hussein and the Taliban. In the case of Iran, that same option is all but impossible short of a direct, unprovoked Iranian act of war against the United States. All of the other options on the table are much harder to make work than they may seem at first blush. It is worth remembering that in the twenty-five years since the taking of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, the United States has tried every policy imaginable, from undeclared warfare to unilateral concessions, and none of them has solved our problems with Iran (although some were more successful than others in accomplishing secondary American goals).

If Americans know the history of Iran and U.S.-Iranian relations too little, then Iranians know it too well. For Iranians, the history is a constant stumbling block, made much worse by the fact that what they know as history is, in most cases, a distorted concoction of their own nationalist, religious, and even Marxist zealots. This too makes it crucial that Americans understand both the truth of that history and the version of it known by most Iranians. Our history must be a source of lessons for the future, but we must also understand the lessons that Iranians have (mis)learned in the past.

For all of these reasons, if we are ever to ameliorate, let alone eliminate, our problems with Iran, we must start with an appreciation of their history and ours together. And now is a good time to be thinking about how we are going to handle our differences.

Why Iran, Why Now?

I chose to write this book now because there are signs of important developments coming in Iran in the not too distant future. These developments could be positive or negative—a transition to real democracy or the solidification of Islamist autocracy, the acquisition of nuclear weapons or the embrace of collective security, a greater openness to the outside world or a greater effort to shut it out. All are possible. These changes hold out a series of challenges and opportunities for the United States. We may be able to open the path to a much better relationship with Iran in the future, or we may face a much more dangerous threat. But the one truth that has emerged over the past two or three

years is that it is increasingly important that the United States begin to make some fundamental decisions about Iran and fashion a policy to achieve our goals.

As anyone who has served in government knows, it is easiest to redirect the ship of state if changes are made well in advance of dramatic events—and hardest when forced to react to sudden, unforeseen developments. By the same token, it is very difficult to find the political willingness to make far-reaching change as long as problems seem distant. Unable to turn away from the problems it created in Iraq and unable to reconcile the deep internal divisions over policy toward Iran, the Bush administration has adopted a policy of “kicking the can down the road” where Iran is concerned. It has left Iran policy mostly in the hands of the International Atomic Energy Agency and our European allies—none of whom are terribly interested in looking out for America’s best interests. Thus, difficult as it is to tear our attention away from the all-consuming problems of Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Gaza, and the West Bank, it is time to think long and hard about Iran. If we do not, I fear that in a few years’ time we will wish that we had.

Today, the United States is waist deep in a war against terror. With the demise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Iran is probably the world’s worst state sponsor of terrorism. If the goal of the United States is to eliminate terrorism as a legitimate method of expressing political grievance, then Iran’s policies must surely be addressed. However, the worst mistake we could make would be to approach Iran through the prism of the war on terrorism. Getting Iran out of the terrorism business will be very difficult and the approach we have used with Afghanistan and Iraq would likely be a grave mistake with Iran. Dealing with Iranian sponsorship of terrorism means dealing with Iran on its own terms, and that takes us back to the tangle of U.S.-Iranian relations.

The same can be said for Iran’s nuclear program. Like a bad dream, Iran’s nuclear program continues to plague us night after night. While no one really knows how close Iran is to acquiring a workable weapon—and our various experiences with Iraq over the past fifteen years should make us very cautious about all such predictions—there does seem to be a consensus among even the most dovish that Iran is further along in acquiring a nuclear weapons capability than was believed even a few years ago.

Iran’s nuclear program in particular makes the present an important moment to consider policy toward Iran. There is no way of knowing how Iran will behave if they acquire nuclear weapons. Their past behavior certainly gives reasons for concern. If possession of a nuclear deterrent prompts Iran to

revert to an aggressive, anti-American foreign policy of destabilizing regional regimes, as it tried in the 1980s and early 1990s, it could cause great harm to U.S. interests in the region. However, because Iran is still probably some way off from acquiring nuclear weapons, there is reason to believe that the United States could take actions in the near term that might delay or even preclude such an event altogether. Moreover, at least for the moment, our leading allies have shown some concern regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program, and this too suggests that the United States might have options for dealing with this problem that were not available even five years ago. If we do not take advantage of this window of opportunity to deal with Iran's nuclear program in particular, someday we doubtless will regret not having done so.

The issue of Iraq raises another Iran-related problem. The reconstruction of Iraq was always going to be a long, hard process, but we have made it much harder than it ever needed to be thanks to our many mistakes during the first year after the fall of Baghdad. Iran has considerable assets it can bring to bear in Iraq. If we can somehow convince them to be helpful there, it potentially might mean the difference between success and failure. On the other hand, if they decide to try to undermine our efforts there, they could create the kind of hellish conditions for American forces that they eventually did for us in Lebanon in the early 1980s.

Finally, we must recognize that there has been an important change in Iran since 2004 that requires a fresh look at our policy. After the stunning victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential election of 1997, it became a commonplace to assume that Iran was changing for the better—democratization at home, moderation abroad seemed the inevitable path for the country. To a considerable extent, that gave American policy makers an out when contemplating Iran. The certainty that Iran was changing for the better, even if no one knew how quickly, relieved a lot of pressure to deal with Iran's troubling behavior since it was assumed that time would eventually solve all of our problems.

Since the disastrous Majles (the Iranian Parliament) elections of February 2004, however, this can no longer be taken for granted. As chapter 12 explains, the successful emasculation of Khatami's reform movement and the development of a modified "China model" by Iran's hard-liners suggests that while the vast majority of Iranians still want that change, they may not get it anytime soon. If Iranian hard-liners have found a way to hold on to power for the foreseeable future, then the United States must confront a much harder range of choices than we realized even a few years ago. Iran's hard-liners may have lost the edge and the unrealistic ambitions of Ayatollah Khomeini, but it is still less than certain that they can be trusted to pursue a policy of modera-

tion and engagement with the Western world—let alone the United States. In those circumstances, Iran's determination to acquire nuclear weapons and continued support for terrorism become even more disquieting.

A St. Patrick's Day Lesson

On March 17, 2000, I stood in a packed room at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, watching from the wings while Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave a speech I knew practically by heart. I had not written that speech, but as the director for Persian Gulf affairs at the National Security Council, I had spent weeks wrestling with the text—and the people who wrote it. It was not a perfect speech (a topic to which I return in chapter 11), but it was pretty good. At one dramatic moment, Secretary Albright announced, "In 1953, the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. The Eisenhower administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons; but the coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development. And it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs. Moreover, during the next quarter century, the United States and the West gave sustained backing to the Shah's regime. Although it did much to develop the country economically, the Shah's government also brutally repressed political dissent. As President Clinton has said, the United States must bear its fair share of responsibility for the problems that have arisen in U.S.-Iranian relations. Even in more recent years, aspects of U.S. policy towards Iraq during its conflict with Iran appear now to have been regrettably short-sighted, especially in light of our subsequent experiences with Saddam Hussein."

Iranians had angrily demanded such an admission from the United States for two decades. The 1953 coup in particular was central to their anger at the United States and their conception of America's manipulation of Iran for the twenty-five years that followed. Now they finally had the acknowledgment and apology that they had wanted. What was their response? Ayatollah Khamene'i, Iran's supreme leader himself, gave Tehran's answer to the assembled masses at Mashhad:

Just a few days ago an American minister delivered a speech. After half a century, or over 40 years, the Americans have now confessed that they staged the 28th Mordad [August 19, 1953] coup. They confessed that they supported the suppressive, dictatorial, and corrupt Pahlavi shah for twenty-five years. Please pay attention. We are in the year

1379 [by the Islamic calendar], more than forty years have elapsed since 1332 and the coup d'etat of the 28th Mordad. It is only now that they are admitting that they were behind the coup d'etat. They admit that they supported and backed the dictatorial, oppressive, corrupt and subservient regime of the shah for twenty-five years. And they are now saying that they supported Saddam Husayn in his war against Iran. What do you think the Iranian nation, faced with this situation and these admissions, feels? . . . In the course of those days, during the war, we repeatedly said in our speeches that the Americans are helping Saddam Husayn. They denied this and claimed they remained impartial. Now that 12 years have elapsed, after the end of the war, in a center [the American-Iranian Council] this American Secretary of State is officially admitting that they helped Saddam Husayn. The question is, what good will this admission do us? . . . What good does this admission—that you acted in that way then—do us now? . . . An admission years after the crime was committed, while they might be committing similar crimes now, will not do the Iranian nation any good.

And that was the end of the Clinton administration's bid for reconciliation with Iran. Clearly, the history of Iranian-American relations is crucial to our policy now and in the future. And just as clearly, untangling it is going to be a bear.

THE PERSIAN PUZZLE

From Persepolis to the Pahlavis

To understand the labyrinth of U.S.-Iranian relations, there are at least three things that you need to know about the seven millennia of Iranian history before the twentieth century. The first is that the land that is today Iran is the heir to a long line of remarkable predecessors. In its day, the Persian Empire was a superpower like nothing the world had ever seen—with a monotheistic religion, a vast army, a rich civilization, a new and remarkably efficient method of administration, and territory stretching from Egypt to Central Asia. All Iranians know that history well, and it is a source of enormous pride to them. It has given them a widely remarked sense of superiority over all of their neighbors, and, ironically, while Tehran now refers to the United States by the moniker “Global Arrogance,” within the Middle East a stereotypical complaint against Iranians is their own arrogant treatment of others.¹

The second important aspect of Iran's early history that still defines the Iranian state and has had a tremendous impact on U.S.-Iranian relations is that for the last five hundred years, Iran has been the only Shi'i Muslim state in the world. Though 90 percent of all Muslims are Sunni, there are a number of countries where Shi'ah make up either a majority (Bahrain, Iraq, Iran) or a significant minority (Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen). But only Iran adopted Shi'i Islam as its state religion. Although the Sunni-Shi'ah divide is not as caustic as other interreligious splits, it is not a trifle either. There are important aspects of Shi'ism that have helped shape Iranian political culture in ways that are quite different from that of other Muslim nations. What's more,

it has heightened both Iran's sense of uniqueness and its sense of isolation. For Iranians, Shi'ism is a key element of their culture, and for many Arabs and other non-Iranians, the terms "Shi'ah" and "Persian" were long considered synonymous.

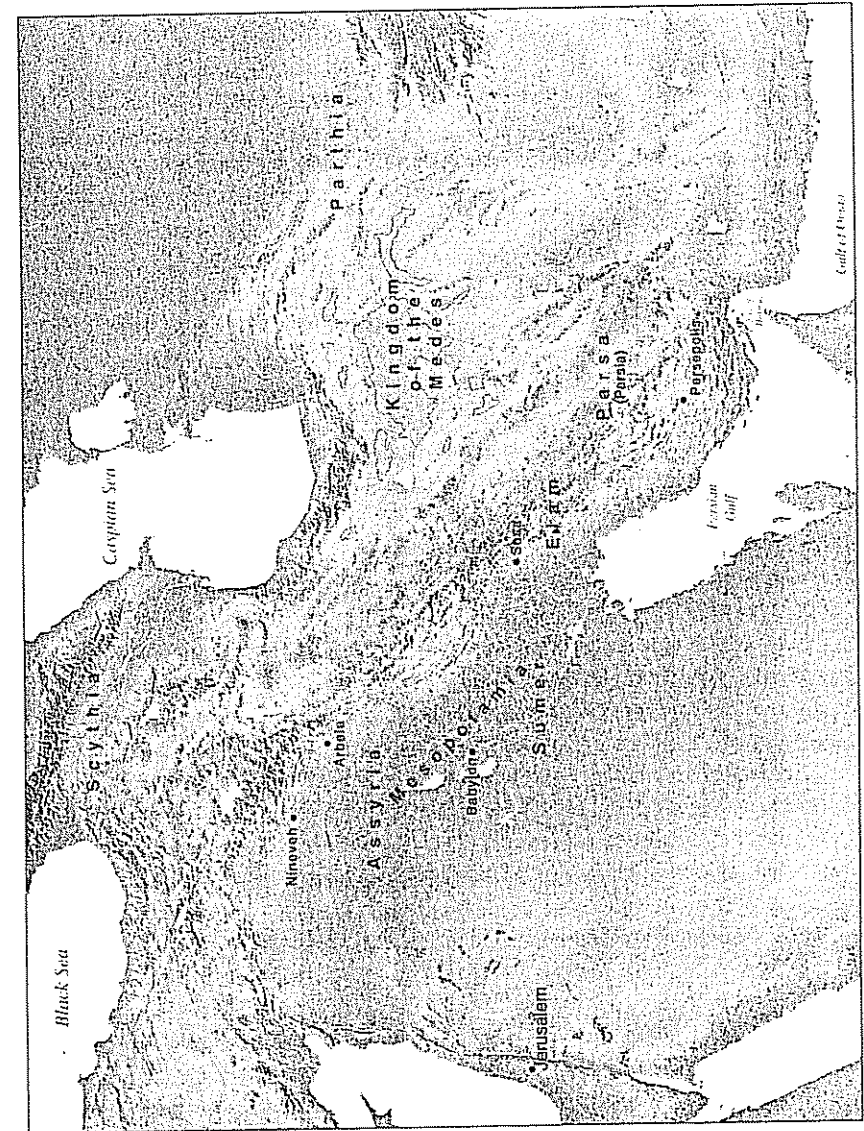
Last, for roughly a century and a half beginning in the early 1800s, a weak Iranian state became prey to powerful external actors, principally the European great powers. Iranians (Persians, as they were then still known) were accustomed to looking down on Europeans as barbarian adherents to a superseded religion and a primitive civilization. Now, suddenly, they were trouncing the shah's armies, carving up their lands, making and unmaking governments, monopolizing their markets, and treating their land as battleground, playground, and campground with no regard for the needs or desires of the Iranians themselves. It was humiliating; it was frustrating, and it was frightening for Iranians to be so vulnerable and so constantly manipulated by these foreign powers. And it reinforced a powerful sense of xenophobia coupled with an inferiority complex among Iranians to complement their superiority complex.

Elaine Sciolino has covered Iran since the revolution and is one of the most knowledgeable journalists writing on Iran, yet even she admits in her book *Persian Mirrors* that "whenever I think I understand Iran, it throws me a curve."² Iran is a maddeningly complicated state and society, and even a cursory understanding of its motives today requires knowing a fair bit about the forces that have shaped the nation over time.

Ancient History

When the first tribes entered Iran after the last ice age, they found an inhospitable land. The territory of Iran is fenced in by three great mountain ranges—the Alborz in the north, the Zagros in the west and south, and the Mekran in the southeast. In the center is a great plateau that is itself mostly uninhabitable. Two vast deserts, the Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut, in the east of the central plateau, render roughly half its territory unfit for agriculture. It has few navigable rivers.³

The mountains and deserts, the poor soil, and the lack of good rivers made communications difficult in ancient Iran. As a result, the population became deeply fragmented. In those parts of the land that were fit for agriculture, secluded villages and isolated towns—with only a few big cities—became the rule. Nomadic tribes who depended on herding livestock inhabited the rest. Because of the discrete separation of so much of the population, Iran became a patchwork of ethnic, religious, tribal, and other groupings, all of whom seemed to find constant reasons for conflict with their neighbors.⁴



Thus, it may seem odd that so difficult a land would produce one of the world's first great multiethnic empires. Perhaps a hard land made for hard people who could then conquer their softer neighbors? Whatever the reason, for centuries of the ancient world, the empire that emerged from ancient Iran was a superpower in a league by itself.

The first people to settle and establish a civilization in what would become Iran, however, were hardly world beaters. The Elamites lived in the far southwest of the land, close by to what was then the great civilization of Sumer—mankind's first true civilization, the home of the biblical Garden of Eden, and the ancient precursor of modern Iraq. Elam suffered from the superior power of the Sumerians as much as it benefited from their more advanced culture and technology.

In the second millennium B.C., migratory waves from eastern Europe brought the Indo-European race of Aryans into Persia. Three groups of Aryans swept in and settled in different parts of the country: the Scythians, who conquered the far northwest from their strongholds around the Black Sea; the Medes (or Mada), who settled in a wide swath of land in the center of the country; and the Persians (or Parsa), who eventually made their home in the south, in what would eventually become Iran's Fars (derived from "Pars") province. Other elements of the Aryan race would spread westward from their primordial homeland into northern Europe, to constitute the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples whom the Nazis would make so much of.⁵

For many centuries, it was the Medes who dominated ancient Iran. They were forced to unite quickly and develop an effective society to stave off the fearsome Assyrian Empire to their west. At that time, Assyria ruled Mesopotamia and much of the Near East with a highly developed and highly brutal war machine. In constant warfare with the Assyrians, the Medes rarely fared well, but, aided by the Zagros Mountains, they were ultimately able to hold back the Assyrian incursions.

Although the term "Mede" would remain in European usage as a synonym for "Persian" for millennia, little has survived of their history or society. The era of the Mede ascendancy saw the birth of one of the world's first monotheistic religions—Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster ("Zarathustra" in Greek) lived from roughly 628 to 551 B.C. and preached of a single great god, Ahura Mazda, of whom all other gods were simply poorly described parts. Zoroastrianism was deeply concerned with the eternal relationship between good and evil, and many scholars believe that, even in modern Iran, Zoroaster's focus on this permanent struggle remains an important element lurking beneath the surface of

much religious and secular philosophy. Khomeini's obsession with the struggle between good (epitomized by Islam and Iran) and evil (the West, the United States) is often described as a manifestation of this deep-seated Iranian trait. Zoroastrianism was also the first religion to preach the notion that humans would face judgment after death based on their actions in life, and that each soul would then spend eternity in either Paradise or perdition. Zoroastrianism became the chief religion of the Medes (and the Persians) and would dominate Iranian spiritual life until the Islamic conquest more than a thousand years later.⁶

Ultimately, most of what we know of the Medes regards their eventual displacement by the Persians. In 636 B.C., the Elamites were crushed in battle by the great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. This defeat opened the way for the rise of the Persians. The defeat of Elam (the Persians' neighbors to the west) created room for the Persians to expand their land and power. With their new status, the Persian kings allied themselves with the Babylonians, and together they defeated the Assyrians, sacking the Assyrian capital of Ninevah in 612 B.C. In about 559 B.C., Cyrus II (later called Cyrus the Great) took the throne of Persia. It was Cyrus who took a state that had made itself regionally important, and turned it into the vast Persian Empire. Drawing on the new power provided by the combined lands of Persia, Elam, and parts of Assyria, Cyrus turned on the Medes and conquered them. He quickly followed this victory with successful campaigns against the Parthians and Hyrcanians farther to the east, before turning west and smashing the fabulously wealthy King Croesus of Lydia (in present-day northern Turkey), and incorporating Asia Minor into his empire. After his Lydian victory, Cyrus turned south, conquering Babylon, where he freed the Jews from their captivity and permitted them to return to Palestine—thereby earning considerable praise in the Bible's Book of Isarah. When Cyrus finally died, he was followed by his son Cambyses II, who added Egypt to Cyrus's colossal Persian demesne.⁷

In 522 B.C., when Cambyses' son Darius ascended the throne as the king of kings of Persia, his empire was the greatest in the world. It stretched from the Aegean to Afghanistan, from the Black Sea to the Blue Nile. It was estimated to have contained 50 million people, an unimaginable population for that time. So vast an empire was difficult to govern with ancient communications and organization, and Darius's greatest achievement was a thorough internal reform of the empire. He built roads—2,500 kilometers' worth of them. He created a system of provinces ruled by satraps (governors) capable of acting on his behalf. He instituted a standardized system of weights and measures and introduced uniform gold and silver coinage. His commercial reforms made Persia a trading juggernaut that dominated the markets of the ancient

Near Eastern world. And Darius built a magnificent new imperial capital at Persepolis with an eclectic architectural style that attempted to blend elements of the motifs of all of the many subject peoples of the empire.⁸

Darius also mounted the first Persian invasion of ancient Greece, which looms so large in the Western consciousness. It was Darius whose forces landed at Marathon in 490 B.C. only to be defeated by the Athenian hoplite army. Darius's defeat by so tiny and insignificant a nation as the Athenian city-state spurred his son and successor, Xerxes, to mount a much grander expedition. In 480 B.C., Xerxes led a massive force of possibly as many as 200,000 troops across the Hellespont to conquer all of Greece. At Thermopylae, he was detained by the illustrious, doomed stand of 300 Spartan warriors and their great king, Leonidas, whose sacrifice inspired their squabbling countrymen to unite against the Persian foe. Later that year, the Athenian fleet scored a stunning victory over the Persians at Salamis, forcing Xerxes to halt the invasion. The next year, at Plataea, a combined Greek army led by the Spartans smashed a Persian force, ending the Persian threat to Greece and setting a limit on Persia's westward expansion.⁹

A century and a half later, Greece would come back to bite the Persians. In 334 B.C., Alexander the Great, king of Macedon and the leader of a Greek confederation, invaded Persia. For the Greeks, Persia was the world's great superpower and had been for as long as any could remember. Attacking it was the ultimate act of defiance, and anyone who could conquer it would achieve fame unmatched for all the ages. This was precisely the sort of challenge that appealed to the young, headstrong Macedonian monarch. In 334, Alexander crossed the Hellespont with a force of about 35,000 men and proceeded to conquer the greatest empire the world had ever known. In 331, he defeated the Persian Army at the Battle of Arbela (in modern-day northern Iraq) by charging directly at the Persian king, Darius III, who fled the field and so demoralized his troops. The next year Alexander occupied Persepolis and burned it. Eventually, he would push on into Afghanistan and India, before turning back when his exhausted troops mutinied.

Having conquered Persia, Alexander was determined to rule it; he reorganized the empire and attempted to fuse his Greco-Macedonian base with his new Persian conquests. He instituted a common currency, made Greek the "official" language of the entire empire, devised a unified bureaucracy, and even went so far as to order 10,000 of his Greek soldiers to marry Persian women at a mass ceremony at Susa in 324. But Alexander contracted a fever and died the very next year, and without him, his empire could not hold together. It was divided up among a number of his generals. Mesopotamia fell to Seleucus, who made his capital at Babylon and used it as a base to conquer

the Iranian heartland. For the next century, the Iranian lands were ruled by the Seleucid Greeks, who brought Hellenistic influences to Persia.¹⁰

The Seleucids were eventually displaced by the Parthians—a central Asian people descended from the Scythians, who were, in a sense, returning to their old stomping grounds. The Parthians were able to conquer and hold Mesopotamia as well as the Iranian lands, and for several centuries they contested control of Armenia and the Levant with the Roman Empire. The Parthians left almost no surviving records, and scholars speculate that they may not have kept any themselves. But the Parthians too would pass, defeated in 227 A.D. by Ardeshir of Sasan, who would establish in their place the Sassanid Empire. The Sassanids ruled Iran until they in turn were overthrown by a new power rising in the south, Islam.¹¹

The Islamic Invasion

The Sassanids fought ten wars with Rome, many more with the migrating Huns, and developed a highly centralized state firmly grounded in Zoroastrian teachings. But by the sixth century A.D., they were losing their grip on power thanks to revolts among their military nobility, internal discontent, and a series of costly and unsuccessful wars against the Byzantines. They were certainly not ready for the storm that broke upon them in the middle of the next century.

In 622, the Prophet Muhammad made his famed *hijra* (migration) from Mecca to Medina, beginning the Islamic era. Two years later, his followers defeated the Meccans in the Battle of Badr, bringing the new religion back to his homeland and inaugurating the first of the Islamic conquests. The new faith spread like wildfire among the tribes of western Arabia, firing them with a zeal that made them nearly invincible in battle. Within a year after Muhammad's death in 632, the entire Arabian Peninsula had fallen to Islam. Five years later, victory at the Battle of Qadisiyah would bring them control of Ctesiphon, then the capital of Mesopotamia. The Islamic armies then broke the power of the Sassanids at Nahavand in 642, although not until 700 was Iran fully pacified.¹²

In some ways, the Islamic conquest changed everything for the Iranians, and in other ways it did not change that much. The Iranians were slow to convert to the new religion. Not until the ninth century were a majority of Iranians Muslims. Unlike many other lands of the Islamic empire, Arabic did not entirely supplant Persian as the language of the masses—the elites learned it, but most of the population continued to speak variations of Pahlavi, the Persian tongue of the Sassanids. Moreover, the Muslim conquerors actually adopted a great deal from their Iranian subjects. They retained the Sassanid

monetary system, incorporated Sassanid court ceremonies into their own, and borrowed many Sassanid administrative mechanisms, including the office of *vizier* (minister) and the *divan* (a budgetary office). The practice of veiling and seclusion of women—wealthy, freeborn noble women—came from the Persians, too, although both customs were also practiced to some extent by the Greeks and Romans.¹³

Under the first two Islamic dynasties—the Umayyads and the Abbasids—Iran remained firmly within the orbit of the larger Islamic empire. However, the decline of the Abbasids in the tenth and eleventh centuries allowed Iran's rulers to begin to assert a degree of independence from the center. This process was reinforced by climatic change. Over the centuries, irrigation had introduced salinity into the Iranian soil, leading to desertification, which forced formerly settled agricultural communities to adopt nomadic ways of life that made them more difficult to control by centralized authority.¹⁴

Overall, these patterns left Iran vulnerable to invasion by warlike tribes from central Asia—greatest among them the Seljuk Turks, who conquered Iran in the early twelfth century. Nevertheless, the Seljuks recognized themselves to be culturally inferior to their Persian subjects, and they quickly adopted many local practices. Not all Iranians accepted the Seljuks, and one group of Isma'ili Shi'ah created a secret sect that sent out fanatical members to murder their political opponents. In Arabic, these zealots were called the Hashashiyun (because it was believed they smoked hashish before departing on their missions), which became corrupted in European usage to “assassins.”

Of far more devastating consequence were the Mongol invasions that began in the thirteenth century. First Genghis Khan blazed a trail of slaughter and destruction across Iran, followed by his grandson Hulagu, who extended the bloody Mongol conquests farther west, sacking Baghdad in 1258. The Mongols did terrible and, in many cases, permanent damage—destroying fragile underground water tunnels and massacring so many Iranian males as to radically alter parts of Iran's topography and demography. A second wave under Tamerlane (Timur the Lame or Timur Lang) in the fourteenth century was gentler only by comparison with its predecessors—the razing of the great cities of Isfahan and Shiraz being cases in point. The Mongols were skilled at obliterating things but poor at building anything lasting of their own. They left behind little but a legacy of misery after their passing.

Shi'ism Comes to Iran

In the wake of the chaos left by the Mongol rulers, Iran became a cockpit to be fought over by a variety of Turkic and Afghan peoples. For that reason, it is

somewhat remarkable that an indigenous group, the Safavids, would finally succeed in reunifying the country—the first native dynasty to rule the land in more than a millennium. The Safavids began as a militant Sufi (mystic) sect of Shi'i Islam. After conquering the great northwest Iranian city of Tabriz in 1501, the Safavids moderated many of their more extreme beliefs—such as the notion that their leaders were divine—and launched a series of offensives that soon brought the rest of the traditional Persian realm under their control. However, this stability came with a price: they demanded that all of the inhabitants, the vast majority of whom were Sunni Muslims, convert to Shi'ism.¹⁵

Thus it was the Safavids who brought the Shi'i version of Islam to Iran. Although Shi'ism is often associated with Iran because Iran is the largest Shi'i country today, its origins have nothing to do with Iran. Instead they derive from the earliest days of the Islamic empire.

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, there was disagreement among his followers over who should be named his successor (*caliph*) as leader of the Muslims. Although an important minority of the original companions of the Prophet favored 'Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, the majority backed Muhammad's longtime companion and father-in-law, Abu Bakr. 'Ali eventually became the fourth successor to the Prophet, but his murder in the garrison town of Kufa in southern Iraq reopened the debate on succession. (He was assassinated in 661 by a dissident soldier, one of a group who opposed his lenient treatment of the rebellious governor of Damascus, Mu'awiya.) Upon the death of 'Ali, his followers, or partisans, demanded that the succession remain within the family of the Prophet and to its only survivors, the sons of 'Ali—Hasan and Husayn. Members of the dominant merchant clans of Mecca and Medina, however, backed the claims of another prominent tribe, the Umayyids, led by Mu'awiya. Hasan gave up his claim and Mu'awiya was named caliph.

But not everyone accepted Hasan's decision. Those followers of 'Ali who rejected Mu'awiya became known as the “party of 'Ali” or, in Arabic, the Shi'at 'Ali, later abbreviated to Shi'ah. 'Ali's youngest son, Husayn, became the leader of the Shi'ah, although he made no claim to the caliphate as long as Mu'awiya lived. When Mu'awiya died in 680, Husayn hoped to claim the caliphate, but he and seventy-one of his followers were waylaid at nearby Karbala by a far greater force under Yazid, the son of Mu'awiya, who (naturally) believed that the caliphate should pass to him. Husayn and his followers were slaughtered at Karbala on the tenth day of the month of Moharram. Husayn and his brother Abbas were buried in Karbala, which became—together with their father's tomb in Najaf—the holiest sites in Shi'i Islam. The tenth day of Moharram, the day of *Ashura* (“tenth” in Arabic), became the holiest day of

the Shi'i religious calendar, when the faithful wail and even flog themselves bloody to excoriate themselves for, figuratively, not having come to the defense of Husayn at Karbala. Indeed, the martyrdom of Husayn and the mythology of the fatally doomed cause became important touchstones of the Shi'i faith.

The Shi'i and Sunni sects of Islam have a great deal in common—far more, arguably, than the doctrines of Protestant and Catholic Christianity, for example. And although born of a blood feud, the Sunni-Shi'i split has not been a particularly gory one; again, there is nothing in Islamic history like the appalling wars of the Reformation that devastated Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A key distinguishing feature of Shi'ism, however, is the concept of the Imamate. Shi'is believe that the succession from the Prophet rightly should have passed to 'Ali and then to 'Ali's blood line. Most Iranians are Twelver Shi'ah, the mainstream Shi'i denomination. As their name implies, Twelvers believe that there were twelve imams: 'Ali, then his sons Hasan and Husayn, and nine others. The twelfth imam was taken into hiding to protect him from the enemies of Shi'ism when he was just a baby, and later it was announced that he had entered into a form of occultation and would return only at a much later date in messianic fashion as the Lord of the Age, the Mahdi, who will bring an era of justice followed by ultimate judgment for all mankind.

The concept of the imamate is important because it contributes to another key difference between Sunni and Shi'ah. In its simplest form, the Sunni faith maintains that God has given mankind everything we need to live our lives properly in the form of the Quran and the sayings and histories of the Prophet, the proper interpretations of which were finalized in the ninth and tenth centuries. Shi'is believe that the imams were themselves divinely guided, and so it fell to them to lead the community in righteous fashion, which they did by definition. The loss of the twelfth imam consequently posed a problem for the Shi'ah: Who was going to lead them? This problem led eventually to a reliance upon men called *mujtahids*—those capable of practicing *ijtihad* (the ability to interpret the holy scriptures). These were religious leaders responsible for guiding the community in the absence of the imam. At the pinnacle of the Shi'i religious hierarchy, the most respected and revered *mujtahids* were granted the title *marja-e taqlid* (source of emulation). Effectively, the concept behind this structure held that only those most learned in Islamic jurisprudence (the *mujtahids*) were capable of interpreting the scriptures to determine how men and women should live their lives in the absence of the twelfth imam. Everyone else had to look to a source of emulation (a *marja-e taqlid*), who were always highly respected *mujtahids*, and follow their example to live

righteous lives. In the nineteenth century, the notion of a *marja-e taqlid al-mutlaq* (the "absolute" or "supreme" *marja-e taqlid*) as the ultimate exemplar for all Shi'ah to follow also entered Shi'i theology and would become the root of Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or "rule of the jurispudent."¹⁶

The emergence of the *mujtahids* and the concept of the *marja-e taqlid* at the peak of it all gave rise to a fairly elaborate religious hierarchy within Shi'ism that is not matched by Sunni Islam. Would-be mullahs (a Persian term for a cleric that in Arabic is rendered '*alim*') begin by attending a seminary, a *madrasah*, often in one of the great centers of Shi'i learning (called *hawzas*) at Qom in Iran or Najaf in Iraq. From there, they might go on to be the local mullah in a village or teach under the guidance of a higher-ranking cleric in one of the seminaries themselves. In time, as they demonstrated their learning, their familiarity with the Quran and other Islamic scripture, and their ability to deal with questions posed by their students or congregants, they might be accepted as a *hojjat-ol Islam* ("proof of Islam"). If their wisdom and prestige were to continue to rise, they might be acclaimed as an ayatollah ("sign of God"), which requires them to write a lengthy dissertation elaborating on how people should conduct themselves in day-to-day life as a guide for their followers. Finally, at the very top, is the exalted rank of *ayatollah al-uzma* (grand ayatollah, literally "greatest sign of God"), which is a relatively recent rank that was used to distinguish the very top ayatollahs after "title inflation" raised many lesser figures to the rank of ayatollah and so diminished its cachet. All of the grand ayatollahs were *marjas*, and in the nineteenth century, a *marja-e taqlid al-mutlaq* was then named from the handful of grand ayatollahs.

The Qajar Dynasty and the Early Modern Era in Iran

Having brought Shi'ism to Iran, the Safavids held power from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In 1722, Ghilzai tribesmen from Afghanistan conquered much of Iran, effectively emasculating the dynasty. Various external and internal groups contested power in Iran until 1795, when the Qajars—a Turkic tribe who had migrated to Iran from Central Asia in the fourteenth century—were able to defeat their rivals and claim the throne of a reunified Persian state.¹⁷

The Qajars would not rule happily for very long. The world was changing all around Iran, and not necessarily to its advantage. The rise of maritime commerce meant that many of the trade routes that had once passed from the Far East through Iran to the West now sailed around the mountainous land altogether. Without that trade, Iran's cities declined. This, coupled with further growth in nomadism, further weakened the strength and control of the central

government. Meanwhile, the European states were growing powerful and creeping ever closer to Iran. In 1763, the Iranian ruler Karim Khan granted the British East India Company the right to build a base and a trading post at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf.¹⁸ More dangerous still, to the north, the Russians were slowly digesting new conquests in the Black Sea area and setting their sights on targets even farther south.

Persia (as it was then still called) and Russia first came to blows in 1804, when their imperial ambitions collided in Georgia. In a nine-year war, the Russians prevailed decisively, forcing the Iranians to cede all of their lands in the Caucasus and to agree to give up the right to maintain any naval forces in the Caspian Sea.¹⁹ But in the age of the Great Game between Russia and Britain, as these opponents sparred and fenced across the length of Asia, Russia's victory could only increase British interest in the country. With the shah (king) of Persia still smarting from his drubbing by the Russians, it was not difficult for British envoys to convince him to sign a protectorate agreement with His Majesty's government. The Definitive Treaty of 1814 pledged British support for Persia in return for Persian promises that no other foreign troops would be allowed into Iran and that only British officers would be allowed to train the Persian Army—a French training mission having formerly served that purpose since 1807.²⁰

The signing of the Definitive Treaty officially made Iran a pawn in the Great Game. The shah had hoped to use British support to defend his realm against the Russians in the near term and use British military assistance to rebuild his army so that he could eventually avenge his losses to the Russians. The European powers had other things in mind. The Russians sought to rule Persia. The British saw Persia as yet another buffer to the "jewel in the Crown" of India. Thus they wanted an independent Persia, stable and strong enough to withstand the Russians but not strong enough to constitute a threat to India itself.²¹ Inevitably, it was the Iranians who lost out in this struggle.

In 1826, the Persians launched an offensive into the Caucasus to try to regain the lands they had lost in 1813. Their timing was terrible. The British were then allied with the Russians against the Turks in the War of Greek Independence and so provided no aid to Iran against the Russians. After some initial Persian victories, the Russians regained their balance and began to systematically demolish the shah's forces. By 1828, the Persian armies had been so badly mauled that the shah was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Turkmanchai. It confirmed Persia's loss of all of its former possessions in the Caucasus, forced Persia to grant economic concessions and extraterritorial

privileges to Russian citizens, and saddled the shah's government with enormous war reparations. It was a stunning blow to Iranian self-confidence, and it would not be the last.²²

Many of the trends established at the beginning of the century would plague Iran right till its end. A variety of vicious circles emerged that slowly sapped the strength of the Qajar state. Desertification, changing trade patterns, the growth of European manufacturing (which could produce better goods more cheaply than traditional Iranian handicrafts workshops), and the persistent problems of communications across Iran's mountains and deserts helped impoverish the nation and weaken the central government. However, the shahs of Persia were slow to recognize this weakness and continued to embark on foreign wars that generally turned out to be not just humiliations but expensive ones to boot.²³

Over time, various Iranian political elites did recognize the increasing gap between themselves and the Europeans in military, commercial, and bureaucratic efficiency, and attempted to institute programs of broad reform similar to those attempted by their Egyptian and Turkish coreligionists. However, Persia lacked the wealth of either Egypt or Turkey to purchase European weaponry, manufacturing plants, and expertise. Thus these efforts at reform were often costly failures that Iran could not afford.²⁴ Nor were they helped by the international financial markets, which saw a century-long decline in the price of silver—the basis of Persia's currency—thus making it ever harder for the Iranians to pay for imports.²⁵ More damaging still, the decline in the silver market caused massive inflation in Persia, prices rising by 600 percent between 1850 and 1860.²⁶

The inefficient Qajar state had great difficulty extracting resources from this increasingly poor nation. Corruption was rampant among the shah's ministers, and the shahs themselves spent extravagantly, including on monstrously expensive sojourns in Europe in which they would move much of the court to Paris, London, Italy, or some other European locale for months at a time. As the century wore on, these trends in turn prompted a pattern of behavior familiar to other, less developed countries: the Qajars began to borrow—to pay for their wars, their defeats, their efforts at reform, their corruption, their luxuries, and their increasingly unbalanced trade. But because their reform efforts bore little or no fruit and they refused to curb their own spending, their debts simply mounted until they were forced to begin selling concessions and the meager manufacturing capability they had to foreigners to try to pay off their debts—which reduced future revenue and made them ever more dependent on the Europeans.²⁷

Because the concessions effectively deprived them of the ability to raise

revenues by imposing duties on foreign goods, the regime instead imposed *internal* tariffs, which had the effect of further undermining domestic manufacturing by making goods produced in Persia even less competitive with European industrial production. Entire Iranian industries were thus wiped out by foreign competition, impoverishing Persia's middle class and artisanry. At various points, European creditors pressed the shahs to sell off Crown lands to repay debts, increasing the power of the landlords at the expense of the central government and further diminishing royal revenues in the future. Moreover, these new duties brought the shahs increasingly into competition with Iran's rising middle class, composed largely of merchants and businessmen (called *bazaaris* because their place of business was the bazaar, meaning "market" in Persian) who were being penalized for the government's financial mistakes. In response, they began to clamor for some degree of political representation so that they could defend their hard-earned capital against the depredations of an arbitrary and incompetent regime.²⁸

Throughout the century, the Persians considered Russia to be their principal external threat. Russia was the giant at their doorstep, while Britain seemed distant, and interested principally in defending India, not ruling Persia. Consequently, the Persians actively encouraged British investment in the early part of the century. Of course, the British were hardly disinterested, let alone benevolent, to the Persians. Despite their treaty obligations, they failed to aid the shah during the second Russo-Persian War and forcibly turned back two Persian invasions of Afghanistan—going so far as to seize Persia's Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf and bombard its main port of Muhammarah to force the Persians to vacate the Afghan city of Herat in 1856. The British also hampered the construction of railways in Iran for fear that this would make the country both more desirable to the Russians and easier for them to invade. And both Britain and Russia intervened frequently in Persian internal, external, and commercial affairs as it suited their needs or tastes.²⁹

For these reasons, at least some Persians also came to distrust and dislike the British. Yet Britain was more in favor than out among the Persian elite during the nineteenth century, and in 1872 they demonstrated their ardor by granting Baron Paul Julius von Reuter, a naturalized British subject, a monopoly over virtually all of Iran's economic and financial resources. In the words of Lord Curzon, then Britain's foreign secretary, it was "the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a Kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamt of, much less accomplished, in history."³⁰ The shah, Nasir ed-Din, was desperately short of

cash to fund his extravagant trips to Europe, and the prime minister, Mirza Hosain Khan Moshir-al-Dowleh, was a Westernizing reformist who concluded that Iran would be modernized only if it turned its whole economy over to the British. (It is worth pointing out that Moshir-al-Dowleh also stood to benefit handsomely from the concession. No one was entirely selfless in late-Qajar Iran.)³¹

The Reuter Concession proved to be so abject a surrender to British commercial interests that virtually no one could stomach it. The *bazaaris*, the few remaining industrialists, the nationalists, and the Russians all fought the Reuter Concession, forcing the regime to cancel it.

Nevertheless, the Reuter Concession set the stage for dramas to come. The episode neither alleviated the government's need for cash—and its willingness to sell anything to get it—nor did it mitigate the sense of grievance growing among a wide range of Iranian society. The middle class resented the shah's despotism and his squandering the country's wealth on his own private extravagances. The *bazaaris* resented their loss of markets to foreign imports. The Shi'i clergy had long-standing ties to the bazaar: mullahs and *bazaaris* were often from the same families (one son following the path of religion, others the path of business); *bazaari* trade guilds regularly employed mullahs for a variety of ceremonies; the mullahs would often petition the government on behalf of the *bazaaris*; and much of the income of the mullahs came from tithes and other forms of charity paid mostly by the *bazaaris*. If that were not enough to stir the mullahs against the regime, they also feared the growth of Western influence and secularism, which they blamed on the shah for allowing the foreigners into the country.³²

The simmering dissent first came to a boil in 1891 over a dispute about tobacco. Still short of cash, the Qajar regime granted a concession to a Briton, Major Gerald Talbot, for a monopoly on all tobacco sold in Persia. Tobacco was widely used by Iranians. It was also widely grown there, so the concession promised not only higher prices for smokers but lower profits for the farmers who grew it and the merchants who sold it—all of whom would be forced to sell and buy at prices set by the monopoly. The tobacco concession touched a nerve. When agents of the new Imperial Tobacco Corporation arrived in the southern city of Shiraz, the center of the tobacco trade in Iran, there were large-scale popular disturbances led by a fiery cleric, 'Ali-Akbar Falasiri, who called for a *jihad* against the tobacco company. The Tobacco Revolt quickly became a national rebellion. The *bazaaris*, the peasantry, the Westernized intellectuals, and the clergy all came together to fight the concession. A senior Shi'i cleric issued a *fatwa* (a ruling of Islamic jurisprudence) prohibiting the use of tobacco. Increasingly violent demonstrations and the nationwide boy-