

A Short History of Iran



Iran, historically known in the West as Persia, possesses one of the world's longest continuous civilisations, spanning from ancient antiquity to the modern nation-state. Its history is marked by powerful empires, cultural resilience, religious transformation, and ongoing struggles over identity and governance.

Human settlement on the Iranian plateau dates back thousands of years, with early civilisations such as Elam flourishing by the fourth millennium BCE in what is now southwestern Iran. These early societies laid the groundwork for a region that would become a crossroads of trade, culture, and empire between Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and South Asia.

Persia rose to global prominence in the sixth century BCE with the founding of the Achaemenid Empire by Cyrus the Great. Under Cyrus and his successors, including Darius I, the empire became the largest the ancient world had known, stretching from the Indus Valley to the eastern Mediterranean. The Achaemenids developed sophisticated systems of administration, law, and infrastructure, and practised a notable degree of religious tolerance. Monumental sites such as Persepolis symbolised imperial power and cultural achievement.

This empire fell to Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, ushering in a period of Greek influence. However, Iranian rule soon reasserted itself through the Parthian and later the Sasanian empires. The Sasanian state, which ruled from the third to the seventh century CE, rivalled Rome and Byzantium and made Zoroastrianism the state religion, shaping Iranian identity and institutions on the eve of Islam.

In the mid-seventh century, Arab Muslim armies conquered Iran, integrating it into the expanding Islamic world. While political control shifted, Persian culture endured and profoundly influenced Islamic civilisation. Iranian scholars, poets, and administrators played central roles in the Abbasid

Caliphate, and the Persian language re-emerged as a literary and cultural force. Over centuries, Iran was ruled by a succession of Islamic dynasties, while gradually becoming predominantly Muslim.

A major turning point came in 1501 with the rise of the Safavid dynasty. The Safavids reunified Iran and declared Twelver Shiism the official religion of the state, decisively distinguishing Iran from its Sunni neighbours and shaping its religious and political identity to this day. Cities such as Isfahan flourished as centres of art, architecture, and learning.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under the Qajar dynasty, Iran faced growing internal weakness and increasing pressure from European powers, particularly Britain and Russia. Territorial losses and economic concessions fueled discontent, culminating in the Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century, which introduced a parliament and limited the authority of the monarchy.

In 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi established the Pahlavi dynasty and pursued rapid modernisation and secularisation. In 1935, he formally requested that the country be known internationally as Iran, the name long used by its inhabitants. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, continued these reforms but ruled increasingly autocratically, relying on Western support while facing rising domestic opposition.

This tension culminated in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the monarchy and established the Islamic Republic under Ruhollah Khomeini. The new state combined republican institutions with clerical oversight, fundamentally reshaping Iran's political system. Soon after, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) inflicted enormous human and economic costs and further defined Iran's revolutionary identity.

In the decades since, Iran has remained a central actor in Middle Eastern politics while experiencing persistent internal debates over reform, religion, and personal freedoms. Since late December 2025, Iran has been gripped by some of the most widespread and intense protests in decades. What began as demonstrations against a deepening economic crisis, including rampant inflation and the sharp devaluation of the currency, quickly expanded into broad public dissent against the ruling political system. There were calls for political change and challenges to the authority of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Across cities and towns in every province, crowds took to the streets to express anger over hardship and perceived corruption. Iranian authorities responded with a forceful security crackdown involving the IRGC, the paramilitary Basij militia, and the national police forces. In many locations, security forces have attempted to suppress demonstrations with live ammunition, metal pellet shotguns, tear gas, water cannons, beatings, mass arrests, and communication blackouts that have cut internet and phone service across the country.