# Directions: Read and Annotate

# History of Iran

THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION in 1979 brought a sudden end to the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, which for fifty years had been identified with the attempt to modernize and Westernize Iran. The Revolution replaced the monarchy with an Islamic republic and a secular state with a quasi-theocracy. It brought new elites to power, altered the pattern of Iran’s foreign relations, and led to the transfer of substantial wealth from private ownership to state control. There were continuities across the watershed of the Revolution, however; bureaucratic structure and behavior, attitudes toward authority and individual rights, and the arbitrary use of power remained much the same. In 1987, nearly a decade after the Revolution, it was still too early to determine whether the continuities--always striking over the long sweep of Iran’s history--or the changes would prove the more permanent.

The Revolution ended a pattern of monarchical rule that, until 1979, had been an almost uninterrupted feature of Iranian government for nearly 500 years. The tradition of monarchy itself is even older. In the sixth century B.C., Iran’s first empire, the Achaemenid Empire, was already established. It had an absolute monarch, centralized rule, a highly developed system of administration, aspirations of world rule, and a culture that was uniquely Iranian even as it borrowed, absorbed, and transformed elements from other cultures and civilizations. Although Alexander the Great brought the Achaemenid Empire to an end in 330 B.C., under the Sassanids (A.D. 224-642) Iran once again became the center of an empire and a great civilization.

The impact of the Islamic conquest in the seventh century was profound. It introduced a new religion and a new social and legal system. The Iranian heartland became part of a world empire whose center was not in Iran. Nevertheless, historians have found striking continuities in Iranian social structure, administration, and culture. Iranians contributed significantly to all aspects of Islamic civilization; in many ways they helped shape the new order. By the ninth century, there was a revival of the Persian (Farsi) language and of a literature that was uniquely Iranian but was enriched by Arabic and Islamic influences.

The breakup of the Islamic empire led, in Iran as in other parts of the Islamic world, to the establishment of local dynasties. Iran, like the rest of the Middle East, was affected by the rise to power of the Seljuk Turks and then by the destruction wrought first by the Mongols and then by Timur, also called Tamerlane (Timur the Lame).

With the rise of the Safavids (1501-1732), Iran was reconstituted as a territorial state within borders not very different from those prevailing today. iran/ir\_glos.asp#Shia">Shia (see Glossary) Islam became the state religion, and monarchy once again became a central institution. Persian became unquestionably the language of administration and high culture. Although historians no longer assert that under the Safavids Iran emerged as a nation-state in the modern sense of the term, nevertheless by the seventeenth century the sense of Iranian identity and Iran as a state within roughly demarcated borders was more pronounced.

The Qajars (1795-1925) attempted to revive the Safavid Empire and in many ways patterned their administration after that of the Safavids. But the Qajars lacked the claims to religious legitimacy available to the Safavids; they failed to establish strong central control; and they faced an external threat from technically, militarily, and economically superior European powers, primarily Russia and Britain. Foreign interference in Iran, Qajar misrule, and new ideas on government led in 1905 to protests and eventually to the Constitutional Revolution (1905-07), which, at least on paper, limited royal absolutism, created in Iran a constitutional monarchy, and recognized the people as a source of legitimacy.

The rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who as Reza Khan seized power in 1921 and established a new dynasty in 1925, reflected the failure of the constitutional experiment. His early actions also reflected the aspirations of educated Iranians to create a state that was strong, centralized, free of foreign interference, economically developed, and sharing those characteristics thought to distinguish the more advanced states of Europe from the countries of the East.

This work of modernization and industrialization, expansion of education, and economic development was continued by the second Pahlavi monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. He made impressive progress in expanding employment and economic and educational opportunities, in building up strong central government and a strong military, in limiting foreign influence, and in giving Iran an influential role in regional affairs.

Such explosions of unrest as occurred during the 1951-53 oil nationalization crisis and the 1963 riots during the Muslim month of Moharram, indicated that there were major unresolved tensions in Iranian society, however. These stemmed from inequities in wealth distribution; the concentration of power in the hands of the crown and bureaucratic, military, and entrepreneurial elites; the demands for political participation by a growing middle class and members of upwardly mobile lower classes; a belief that Westernization posed a threat to Iran’s national and Islamic identity; and a growing polarization between the religious classes and the state.

These tensions and problems gave rise to the Islamic Revolution. In the late 1980s, they continued to challenge Iran’s new rulers.

*From Country Reports*

HOMEWORK:

1. Annotate the source to gain a better understanding.