# The Persian Civilization and the Contemporary Cultural Conflict in Iran

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## Abstract

This essay provides a factual description of the Persian civilization from its earliest origins to the present day. It traces a cultural identity that predates the Achaemenid Empire by millennia, describes the Arab Islamic conquest of the seventh century as a civilizational rupture, and situates the current Islamic Republic of Iran as the political expression of an ideology fundamentally foreign to the original Persian tradition. The systematic violence exercised by the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij against the Iranian population is placed within this longer historical and cultural context.

## 1. Origins: Before the Empire

The Iranian plateau has been continuously inhabited for at least 100,000 years. The first urban civilizations emerged around 4000–3500 BCE in what is now southwestern Iran. The Elamite civilization, centered on the city of Susa, was one of the oldest literate cultures in the world — contemporary with Sumer and early dynastic Egypt. The Elamites developed their own writing system, their own legal traditions, and a sophisticated administrative culture long before anything called a Persian Empire existed.

Alongside the Elamites, the Iranian plateau was home to a broad network of pastoral and proto-urban cultures connected to the wider Indo-Iranian migrations from the Eurasian steppe. From these cultures emerged the Magi — a priestly caste whose origins predate any surviving written record. The Magi functioned as astronomers, ritualists, and custodians of cosmological knowledge. Their traditions fed directly into what became Zoroastrianism, the oldest continuously practiced monotheistic religion in the world.

The Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, contains linguistic strata that scholars date to at least 1500–1000 BCE, and possibly considerably earlier. The worldview it encodes is not a primitive mythology but a coherent ethical and metaphysical system: the universe is structured around the opposition between truth (Asha) and falsehood (Druj), and human beings bear full moral responsibility for choosing between them. The influence of this system on the three Abrahamic religions is well documented. The concepts of Satan as a personal adversary of God, the Last Judgment, the resurrection of the dead, heaven and hell, and the coming of a messianic figure all have clear and traceable Zoroastrian antecedents, entering Judaism during the Babylonian exile under Persian rule.

## 2. The Achaemenid Empire: Tolerance as State Policy

When Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid Empire around 550 BCE, he did not impose Persian culture on conquered peoples. The Cyrus Cylinder (539 BCE), discovered in Babylon in 1879 and now in the British Museum, records his policy of religious freedom, the abolition of

forced labor, and the right of displaced peoples to return to their homelands. The Hebrew Bible refers to Cyrus by the term mashiach — anointed one — because he freed the Jewish people from Babylonian captivity and funded the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Achaemenid Empire at its height stretched from the Aegean to the Indus, from Egypt to Central Asia. It was administered through satrapies — regional provinces with considerable local autonomy — held together by loyalty, law, and infrastructure rather than by forced cultural uniformity. Administrative records from Persepolis show that workers, including women, received standardized rations regardless of ethnic origin. Women could hold property, conduct legal transactions, and travel independently.

Darius the Great built the Royal Road — a communication and transport network stretching 2,700 kilometers from Sardis to Susa — standardized weights and measures across the empire, and codified a legal system applied across multiple legal traditions. Persian art and architecture synthesized Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Indian influences into a coherent aesthetic: monumental but human in scale, ordered but not sterile.

## 3. The Sassanid Empire: The Last Pre-Islamic Flowering

After the Macedonian conquest under Alexander and the subsequent Hellenistic Seleucid period, Persia reasserted its identity under the Parthians and then the Sassanids (224–651 CE). The Sassanid Empire rivaled Rome and Byzantium for three centuries. It produced significant achievements in medicine, astronomy, philosophy, architecture, and administration. The Academy of Gondishapur, founded in the third century CE in southwestern Iran, functioned as one of the world's first research universities, where scholars from the Greek, Indian, and Persian traditions worked alongside one another translating and developing knowledge in medicine, mathematics, and philosophy.

Zoroastrianism was the state religion, but Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and Manicheans practiced within the empire with varying degrees of official tolerance. When the Islamic world later produced its Golden Age of science and philosophy between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, much of that achievement rested directly on Sassanid foundations — transmitted by Persian scholars working in Arabic.

## 4. The Arab Conquest: A Civilizational Rupture

Between 633 and 651 CE, Arab armies under the banner of the new Islamic faith defeated the Sassanid Empire in a series of decisive battles. The last Sassanid emperor, Yazdegerd III, fled eastward and was killed in 651. The conquest was militarily rapid but culturally complex.

Persian was suppressed in official and religious contexts and replaced by Arabic. Zoroastrian fire temples were destroyed or converted into mosques. Zoroastrians who refused to convert became dhimmis — a legally subordinate status that carried heavy taxation and significant social restrictions. Many fled to India, where their descendants, the Parsis, have maintained the Zoroastrian tradition continuously to the present day.

Yet the Persian civilization did not disappear. By the ninth and tenth centuries, a Persian cultural renaissance was underway. Scholars and poets began writing again in Persian — now using Arabic script but retaining Persian grammar, syntax, and vocabulary in full. Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (c.

1010 CE), the Book of Kings, was a 60,000-couplet epic deliberately celebrating pre-Islamic Persian kings, heroes, and values. It preserved the memory of Cyrus, Darius, and the mythological heroes of the Iranian tradition at a time when official culture sought to replace them.

The great classical Persian poets — Rumi, Hafez, Saadi, Omar Khayyam, Attar — wrote within an Islamic framework but expressed a sensibility distinctly Persian in character: mystical, humanistic, skeptical of religious dogma, attentive to beauty, pleasure, and the paradoxes of human existence. This literary tradition represented a form of cultural continuity that no conquest fully extinguished.

## 5. The Safavid Turn: Shiism as Persian Identity

In 1501, Shah Ismail I of the Safavid dynasty declared Twelver Shiism the state religion of Iran. The political motivation was partly to distinguish Iran from the Sunni Ottoman Empire to the west. The cultural consequence was profound and lasting. Iran became the institutional center of Shia Islam, with its own clerical hierarchy, sacred calendar, pilgrimage network, and emotional culture centered on the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala in 680 CE.

Shiism gave Persia a form of Islam that was institutionally its own. But it also introduced a clerical class — the ulema — with growing political ambitions. Over the following centuries, this class developed a doctrine that would eventually provide the ideological foundation for the Islamic Republic: the concept of Velayat-e Faqih, the political guardianship of the qualified Islamic jurist, elaborated in its modern form by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s.

## 6. The Pahlavi Period and the 1979 Revolution

Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) and his son Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979) pursued a program of secular modernization and nationalist cultural revival. They promoted the pre-Islamic Persian heritage, renamed the country Iran, and built a national identity centered on the Achaemenid legacy. The 1971 celebrations at Persepolis — marking 2,500 years of Persian monarchy — were the most public expression of this project.

The modernization produced real social and economic change but was implemented under a progressively autocratic regime supported by a feared secret police. The 1979 revolution united Islamists, leftists, liberals, and nationalists against the monarchy. Once the coalition took power, Khomeini's faction systematically eliminated the others and installed a theocracy governed by the principle of Velayat-e Faqih.

## 7. The Islamic Republic as Cultural Displacement

From the perspective of the original Persian cultural tradition, the Islamic Republic does not represent Iran governing itself. Its foundational ideology derives from a specific school of Shia jurisprudence developed in the seminaries of Najaf and Qom. Its supreme leader is selected by a clerical assembly, not elected by the population. Its legal framework is derived from Islamic jurisprudence rather than from Iranian national tradition.

The symbols of the pre-Islamic heritage were systematically marginalized after 1979. The lion-and-sun flag was replaced. Nowruz — the Persian New Year, observed continuously for at least three

millennia — was officially discouraged for decades as incompatible with Islamic values. Pre-Islamic history was minimized in school curricula. Women, who had held legal rights under both the Achaemenid administration and the Pahlavi civil code, were subjected to mandatory veiling and severe legal subordination.

The Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), founded in 1979, is not a conventional national army. Its members swear loyalty to the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolution, not to Iran as a state or nation. The Basij, its paramilitary volunteer arm, recruits heavily from the most religiously conservative and economically marginal sectors of the population — people for whom Islamic revolutionary identity takes precedence over any sense of Persian cultural continuity.

It is for this reason that secular and nationally-minded Iranians frequently describe IRGC and Basij members as "Arabs" — not as an ethnic description but as a cultural verdict: these people are not the heirs of our civilization. They are the continuation of the conquest.

# 8. The Violence Against the Population

When Iranians have risen against the Islamic Republic, the response has been systematic and lethal.

In November 2019, protests triggered by a sudden increase in fuel prices were met with gunfire. Reuters, citing three sources with knowledge of a government report, reported that at least 1,500 people were killed in a matter of days. Security forces fired into crowds, shot people fleeing, and in documented cases killed individuals inside their homes.

In September 2022, the death of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini in the custody of the morality police triggered the largest sustained protests in the history of the Islamic Republic. Hundreds of protesters were killed, including dozens of minors. Amnesty International and Iran Human Rights documented cases in which families were required to pay for the costs of detention or the bullets used before they could retrieve the bodies of their relatives.

This pattern is consistent across multiple crackdowns over four decades. It is not the result of institutional failure or individual excess. It is the predictable output of a system in which defending the Islamic Revolution is defined as a religious obligation, and in which those who oppose the state are classified not as political opponents but as enemies of God and of the Islamic order.

# 9. Conclusion

The Persian civilization is among the oldest continuous cultural traditions in the world. Its roots extend back at least five thousand years to the Elamite cities of the Iranian plateau and to the Magi whose cosmological tradition preceded all surviving texts. Its foundational values — tolerance of diversity, the dignity of the individual, the love of knowledge, the equality of human beings before the law — are documented across millennia and stand in direct contrast to the values embodied by the current Iranian state.

The violence of the Islamic Republic against its own population is not an aberration within an otherwise functional system. It is the logical expression of a government built on ideological foundations foreign to the civilization it controls. The Iranians who continue to resist — at the cost of their lives — are the heirs of Cyrus, of Ferdowsi, of Hafez. They are asserting, against considerable force, that a civilization older than Islam still exists and intends to survive.

# Annotated Bibliography

The following works are recommended for readers who wish to explore these themes in greater depth. They are organized thematically rather than by citation order.

## I. The Elamite Civilization and Early Iran

**Potts, D.T. (1999). *The Archaeology of Elam: Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State*. Cambridge University Press.**
The standard scholarly reference on Elamite history and culture. Covers political history, material culture, religion, and the relationship between Elam and neighboring civilizations from the fourth millennium BCE to the Achaemenid period. Essential for understanding what existed in Iran before the Persians.

**Hole, F. (Ed.) (1987). *The Archaeology of Western Iran*. Smithsonian Institution Press.**
A collection of archaeological studies covering the prehistoric and proto-historic periods on the Iranian plateau. Useful for understanding the deep pre-urban layers of Iranian cultural history.

## II. Zoroastrianism and the Magi

**Boyce, M. (1975–1991). *A History of Zoroastrianism* (3 vols.). Brill.**
The definitive scholarly history of Zoroastrianism from its origins to the early Islamic period. Boyce reconstructs the earliest layers of the Avestan tradition and traces the development of the religion across more than two millennia. Indispensable for understanding the depth and continuity of the Persian religious tradition.

**Duchesne-Guillemin, J. (1963). *The Hymns of Zarathustra*. Beacon Press.**
A scholarly translation and commentary on the Gathas — the oldest hymns of the Avesta, attributed to Zarathustra himself. Provides direct access to the earliest stratum of the tradition.

**de Jong, A. (1997). *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*. Brill.**
Examines how the Magi were perceived and described by Greek and Roman authors, and reconstructs their actual functions and knowledge within the Persian world. Clarifies the distinction between the historical Magi and later popular mythology.

**Boyce, M. & Grenet, F. (1991). *A History of Zoroastrianism, Vol. III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*. Brill.**
Covers the critical period of Persian cultural survival under Hellenistic and later Roman pressure. Documents how Zoroastrian communities maintained their traditions under foreign domination.

## III. The Achaemenid Empire

**Briant, P. (2002). *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*. Eisenbrauns.**
The most comprehensive single-volume history of the Achaemenid Empire available in English. Covers political history, administration, economy, culture, and the empire's relationship with subject peoples. Based on primary sources including the Persepolis Fortification Tablets.

**Kuhrt, A. (1983). "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy."** ***Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*****, 25, 83–97.**
A careful scholarly analysis of the Cyrus Cylinder as a historical document, situating it within the context of Achaemenid imperial ideology. Corrects both exaggerated and dismissive readings of its significance.

**Brosius, M. (1996).** ***Women in Ancient Persia, 559–331 BC*****. Clarendon Press.**
Uses the Persepolis Fortification Tablets and other primary sources to document the legal and economic status of women in the Achaemenid Empire. Directly relevant to the contrast between Persian and Islamic Republican treatment of women.

**Wiesehöfer, J. (2001).** ***Ancient Persia: From 550 BC to 650 AD*****. I.B. Tauris.**
A readable and scholarly overview covering both the Achaemenid and Sassanid periods. Particularly useful for understanding the continuity of Persian cultural identity across different ruling dynasties.

## IV. The Sassanid Empire

**Frye, R.N. (1984).** ***The History of Ancient Iran*****. C.H. Beck.**
A comprehensive history of Iran from prehistoric times through the end of the Sassanid period. Frye was one of the foremost Western scholars of Iranian history and writes with exceptional clarity and depth.

**Daryaee, T. (2009).** ***Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*****. I.B. Tauris.**
A focused and accessible account of the Sassanid Empire. Covers political history, religion, culture, and the circumstances of the Arab conquest. Excellent for understanding what was lost in 651 CE.

**Pourshariati, P. (2008).** ***Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*****. I.B. Tauris.**
A revisionist account of the Sassanid collapse that emphasizes internal political fragmentation rather than Islamic military superiority as the primary cause. Useful for a nuanced understanding of the conquest.

## V. The Arab Conquest and Its Aftermath

**Lapidus, I.M. (2002).** ***A History of Islamic Societies*** **(2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.**
A standard reference on the spread of Islam and the transformation of conquered societies. The chapters on Iran are particularly useful for understanding the long and uneven process of Islamization.

**Bulliet, R.W. (1979).** ***Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*****. Harvard University Press.**
A pioneering quantitative study of the rate of conversion to Islam in Iran and other conquered territories. Demonstrates that Islamization was a gradual process extending over several centuries, not an immediate result of conquest.

**Daniel, E.L. (2001).** ***The History of Iran*****. Greenwood Press.**
A concise and reliable overview of Iranian history from ancient times to the present. Accessible to general readers while maintaining scholarly accuracy.

## VI. Persian Literature and Cultural Continuity

**Davis, D. (Trans.) (2006). *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. Viking.**
The most readable complete English translation of Ferdowsi's epic. The introduction by Davis places the work in its historical context as an act of cultural preservation and resistance.

**Lewisohn, L. (Ed.) (1992). *Classical Persian Sufism: From Its Origins to Rumi*. Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications.**
A collection of scholarly essays on the Persian mystical tradition, examining figures from Hallaj to Rumi within their historical and cultural context. Demonstrates the specifically Persian character of classical Islamic mysticism.

**Meisami, J.S. (1987). *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*. Princeton University Press.**
A scholarly examination of the courtly literary tradition in medieval Persia, demonstrating how Persian poets navigated the space between Islamic orthodoxy and pre-Islamic cultural values.

## VII. The Safavid Period and the Formation of Iranian Shiism

**Newman, A.J. (2006). *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire*. I.B. Tauris.**
A thorough account of the Safavid dynasty and the process by which Iran was transformed into a Shia state. Covers the political, religious, and cultural dimensions of this transformation.

**Arjomand, S.A. (1984). *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*. University of Chicago Press.**
A major scholarly work on the development of Shia political thought in Iran. Essential for understanding the intellectual foundations of the Islamic Republic and the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih.

## VIII. The Pahlavi Period and the 1979 Revolution

**Abrahamian, E. (1982). *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton University Press.**
The standard scholarly account of Iranian political history from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Particularly strong on social class, political movements, and the fragmentation of the anti-Shah coalition.

**Keddie, N.R. (2003). *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press.**
An accessible and authoritative overview of modern Iranian history. Particularly useful for understanding the social and economic conditions that made the 1979 revolution possible.

**Milani, A. (2008). *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran* (2 vols.). Syracuse University Press.**
Biographical studies of key figures in modern Iranian history, illuminating the diversity of the modernizing project and the forces that opposed it.

## IX. The Islamic Republic: Structure and Ideology

**Khomeini, R. (1981). *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. Trans. H. Algar. Mizan Press.**

Primary source. Contains Khomeini's elaboration of the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih. Essential reading for understanding the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic in Khomeini's own words.

**Abrahamian, E. (1993). *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press.**
A critical scholarly analysis of Khomeini's ideology, arguing that it is better understood as a form of Third World populism than as traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Useful counterpoint to purely theological interpretations.

**Buchta, W. (2000). *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy.**
A detailed mapping of the institutional structure of the Islamic Republic, including the relationships between the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, the Basij, the elected government, and the clerical establishment.

## X. The IRGC, the Basij, and State Violence

**Wehrey, F. et al. (2009). *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*. RAND Corporation.**
A comprehensive analysis of the IRGC's expansion beyond its original military role into the political, economic, and social life of Iran. Available freely online through RAND.

**Golkar, S. (2015). *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran*. Columbia University Press / Woodrow Wilson Center Press.**
The most thorough scholarly study of the Basij militia — its recruitment, ideology, social function, and methods of social control. Documents how the Basij operates as an instrument of political surveillance and repression within Iranian society.

**Amnesty International (2020). *Blood-soaked Secrets: Why Iran's 2019 Protest Killings Remain Unresolved*. Amnesty International.**
A detailed documentation of the November 2019 crackdown, based on interviews with survivors, witnesses, and relatives of victims. Available freely at amnesty.org.

**Iran Human Rights (Annual). *Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran*. Iran Human Rights NGO, Oslo.**
Annual documentation of executions and state killings in Iran. The most consistent and reliable source for longitudinal data on state violence. Available at iranhr.net.

## XI. Contemporary Iranian Identity and the Cultural Divide

**Katouzian, H. (2009). *The Persians: Ancient, Medieval and Modern Iran*. Yale University Press.**
A sweeping history of Iran from antiquity to the present, written by one of the foremost Iranian historians. Particularly strong on the question of Iranian cultural identity and its relationship to state power across different periods.

**Ansari, A.M. (2003). *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*. Longman.**
A clear and balanced account of modern Iranian political history, with strong attention to the tension between nationalist, Islamic, and democratic currents in Iranian political culture.

**Gheissari, A. & Nasr, V. (2006). *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty*. Oxford University Press.**
Examines the long history of demands for democratic governance in Iran, situating the current conflict within a tradition of political aspiration that predates the Islamic Republic.

**Rejali, D. (1994). *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society and State in Modern Iran*. Westview Press.**
A scholarly analysis of the use of torture as an instrument of state power in modern Iran, covering both the Pahlavi and Islamic Republican periods. Situates Iranian state violence within comparative and theoretical frameworks.

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