

Iran

POPULATION 75,149,669

MUSLIM 99.4 percent

**OTHER (INCLUDING CHRISTIAN, JEWISH,
ZOROASTRIAN, OTHER, AND UNDECLARED)**
0.6 percent



Country Overview

INTRODUCTION A predominantly Muslim country, the Islamic Republic of Iran is located in the Middle East. It is bordered on the east by Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the south by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, on the west by Iraq and Turkey, and on the north by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea. Iran is located on a plateau that is ringed by mountains, and much of the central part of the country is desert. The country's total land area is 591,352 square miles (1,531,595 square kilometers).

Iran (Persia) is an ancient land with a rich historical and religious background. It was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism (an ancient Iranian religion), and throughout

history it has been host to several religions. Islam was introduced to the region in the seventh century CE, during the first wave of the Arabic Islamic conquests. It took more than a century, however, for the majority of the population to embrace Islam. Iranian culture played a significant role in the formative years of Islamic civilization, first by sharing its rich experience in administration and institution building and later by producing a number of outstanding Muslim scholars, philosophers, scientists, mystics, and poets.

Iranians are predominantly Shia Muslims; the majority of Muslims worldwide are Sunni Muslim. The two schools are divided due to a historical dispute over the legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632). Iranians follow Ithna-ashari Islam, which is based on the belief in the succession of 12 imams (leaders), beginning with Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad). Adherents of Ithna-ashari are often referred to as “Twelvers.” Shia Islam became the official religion of Iran in the 16th century, during the reign of the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736). Declaring an official religion was part of the Safavid dynasty's quest to create religious solidarity against the Ottoman Sunni Empire. By the early 21st century, Iran was the only country in the world with Shia Islam as its official religion. Other religions practiced in Iran include Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, as well as the Bahá'í faith, which originated in Iran. The country also hosted a small community of Mandaeans, also known as Sabaeans.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE According to Islamic law, People of the Book—Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians—are protected minorities, with a degree of religious and legal autonomy. Subsequently these religious

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communities are recognized in the Iranian constitution and have representation in parliament. In 2013, out of the 290 seats in parliament, Christians had three seats, and Jews and Zoroastrians had one seat each. However, the Bahá'í movement, which was considered an offshoot of Shiism from its birth but later declared itself an independent religion, has been outlawed in Iran. Bahá'ís are not recognized in the Iranian constitution and are denied civil rights.

Both the 1911 and 1979 constitutions of Iran recognized religious and cultural autonomy for religious minorities, but these rights have not always been free of restraint. The restrictions, however, have varied from period to period, locality to locality, and issue to issue. Although freedom of religion is granted, for example, proselytizing is forbidden, and Christian churches are not allowed to accept Muslims into their congregations.

Major Religion

SHIA ISLAM

DATE OF ORIGIN Seventh century CE

NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS 69–70 million

HISTORY From the first century of the Islamic calendar (the seventh century CE), adherents of Shia Islam lived as a minority in Iran. Most Iranians were Sunni Muslims until the Safavid dynasty declared Shia Islam the official religion of the country in the 16th century. The Buyid dynasty (945–1055) was the earliest Shia dynasty to rule Iran. It governed the northern provinces along the coast of the Caspian Sea. Although the Buyids dominated the Sunni Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, they did not officially overthrow the Abbasids but preferred to rule by manipulating the caliph. It was not until the 16th century that Shia Islam was adopted and promoted by the Safavids as the official religion.

Under Safavid patronage there began a systematic effort to develop the Shi'i tradition. The Safavid monarchs invited leading Shia scholars from Lebanon and Iraq and established major religious educational centers in Esfahan, their capital city. There, under the auspices of the Safavid court, a major school of philosophy flourished. This school was significant for maintaining the continuity of Islamic philosophy after it had gone into abeyance in other parts of the Muslim world. Also in Esfahan, major works of Shi'i theology, as well as collections of the imams' statements (*abadith*), were produced.

At the same time extensive building programs were carried out at the shrines of the Shia imams both in Iran and Iraq. Influential seminaries were also constructed; Madrasah Chahar-Bagh in Esfahan is among the best known. The Safavid era (16th–18th centuries) was the greatest era of development of Iranian Shi'i art, architecture, and rituals. Under the Safavids, the Shi'i ritual of Muharram became a popular religious and artistic phenomenon. The ritual commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, in the tragic battle of Karbala in the late seventh century. Muharram particularly signifies the Shia-Sunni division. Since the Safavid era, it has become a civic-religious festival in Iran and remains the core of socioreligious life in the early 21st century. Shia Muslims have developed various rituals to commemorate the tragedy. The most important forms of commemoration are the Muharram procession, which is a symbolic funeral, and a religious passion play, called *ta'ziyeh* in Iran.

Two important events took place in the 19th century. The first was the emergence of the Babi movement, an offshoot of Shiism that gradually distanced itself from Islam and ultimately developed into the Bahá'í faith. The second was a confrontation between two schools of thought in jurisprudence, which ultimately gave rise to the institution of the *marja al-taqlid* (source of emulation) and to the *ayatollah* as the highest rank in the Shi'i clergy and the highest religious authority. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the Shia authorities lived mostly in Iraq, but early in the 20th century the city of Qom in Iran became prominent as a center for their work. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi (1923–1999), who resided there, reorganized its seminary, and since then Qom has functioned as one of the most important centers of Shi'i education.

The significance of Qom's religious circle increased after the 1979 revolution, as a result of which the ruling monarch of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was ousted from power and Iran became an Islamic republic. Following the revolution, Shia clergies assumed an extraordinarily important role in the Iranian state. This unprecedented involvement of Shia authorities in politics occurred after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989) developed his political theory of *vilayat-e faqih* (guardianship of jurists) in the early 1970s. According to this theory, which became the cornerstone of the constitution of the Islamic republic, political authority in the absence of the Twelfth Imam (who has been in concealment since 878 and will not return until the end of time) is the prerogative of Shia jurists.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS There were a number of prominent ayatollahs in 20th-century Iran. Akhund Khorasani and his student, Mirza Hossein Naini, played leading roles in the revolution of 1906–II, which established a constitutional government. Haeri Yazdi (1923–1999) and Seyyed Hossein Boroujerdi (1875–1961) were the most important *marjas* (religious referees) of the century; their educational contributions consolidated the position of the religious seminaries of Qom. Ruhollah Khomeini led the 1979 revolution and established the Islamic Republic. Although in the West his name is most often associated with politics, Khomeini was among the most prominent Shia scholars and *marjas* of the century. A jurist and mystic, he was exiled from Iran in 1963 for his outspoken opposition to the government. He subsequently taught in the seminaries of Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s. Ali Shariati (1933–1977) was a non-clerical and intellectual figure who made important contributions to modern developments in Shi'a Islam; his interpretation of Shi'a Islam became the religious ideology of the 1979 revolution. Translations of his works continue to inspire young Muslims outside Iran.

MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS The majority of the Shia theologians and scholars of classical Shiism were of Iranian origin. Some, like Ibn Babuyeh and Allameh Majlesi (1616–1698), lived and are buried in Iran, and their tombs are visited by many. The most celebrated Shia scholar of modern times was Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Tabatabai (1904–1981), an Iranian jurist, philosopher, and mystic who devoted his life to learning and teaching. His best-known work, *Tafsir al-Mizan*, is a voluminous exegesis (analysis of a text) that remains one of the most authoritative Shi'i interpretations of the Koran (also spelled Quran) in modern times. Tabatabai's disciple, Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari (assassinated in 1979), was another prolific and well-known scholar. During the 1970s, when the Iranian intellectual milieu was filled with Western liberal and Marxist ideologies, Mutahhari's works, written in simple and nontechnical Farsi, served to defend and popularize basic principles and issues of Islamic theology and philosophy.

In the postrevolutionary era, a new generation of scholars made a significant contribution to Shi'i discourse, among them Abdolkarim Soroush (1945–), Mojtabeh Shabestari (1936–), and Mohsen Kadivar (1959–). These religious intellectual scholars have challenged an absolutism that has shaped a totalitarian state based on the thesis of *vilayat-e faqih*. They are part of a

Religious Modernist Movement Leaders

During the second half of the 20th century, a religious modernist movement that included such figures as Mehdi Bazargan (1907–1995) and Ali Shariati (1933–1977) contributed to the rise of religious discourse in Iranian politics. Since the 1979 revolution, the movement has been identified by a group known as the circle of religious intellectuals. Among the members of this group is Mohsen Kadivar (1959–), an outspoken critic of the Islamic state in Iran who has made major contributions to political theology. Kadivar initially studied engineering, then moved to Qum, where he pursued classic clerical education and earned *Ijtihad*, the highest level of Shi'i education. Kadivar also received a PhD of Islamic philosophy and theology.

Kadivar is an outspoken critic of the *vilayat-e faqih* system, which was introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini and is the core foundation of the Iranian constitution. Based on traditional Shi'i sources, Kadivar shows that *vilayat-e faqih* is no more than a minor jurisprudential hypothesis; its principle is not supported or proven by any of the four main sources of Shi'i theology.

The author of eight books, Kadivar has been on the receiving end of political restrictions for his role as a political dissident and, as of 2008, was living in exile. He became a visiting research professor of Islamic studies at Duke University's Department of Religion in 2009.

circle that provided the intellectual basis for the reform movement in Iran. Soroush, as a philosopher, criticizes the state's official reading of Islam from an epistemological point of view. He particularly distinguishes the essence of religion, perceived as beyond human reach, from religious knowledge. He argues that religious knowledge, though sincere and authentic, is also rather limited and fallible, like other human knowledge. Soroush also challenges the authority of the clergy as mediator between man and God. Shabestari contributes to postrevolutionary scholarship by looking at Shi'i

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theology and jurisprudence from a modern hermeneutics point of view. He illuminates variability and the essentially limited nature of religious knowledge in general and religious jurisprudence in particular.

Although Soroush and Shabestati have grounded their scholarship with strong religious academic backgrounds, they approach the subject from modern philosophy and hermeneutics. In contrast, Kadivar criticizes *vilayat-e faqih* solely based on traditional Shi'i sources and scholarship. By reviewing the genealogy of *vilayat-e faqih*, Kadivar shows that it is no more than a minor jurisprudential hypothesis; its principle is not supported or proven by any of the four principal sources of Shi'i theology: the Holy Koran, the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, the consensus of the jurists, and logic. Generally, postrevolutionary religious intellectuals call for separating and preserving Islam's spiritual and cultural identity from the imposed official state reading of Islam.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES Iran's religious mosaic is reflected in the diversity of its religious monuments. These include remains of the prehistoric temples of Anahita, a goddess of fertility, in the provinces of Kerman, Fars, and Kermanshah; the remnants of Zoroastrian pilgrimage sites and fire temples, as well as those still active in Yazd and Kerman; a shrine

in the city of Shush dedicated to the biblical prophet Daniel; the many historic Christian churches in the provinces of Azerbaijan and Esfahan; and several Islamic monuments.

Muslims gather for worship in a *masjid* (mosque). *Masjid* means the place of prostration in Arabic. The mosque, however, is not only a place for worship but also a community space. It is a place to gather and socialize, to seek comfort in times of crisis, and to engage in political discussion and debate. Every Iranian city has a grand mosque, known as *Jom'eh Masjid* (Friday Mosque) or *Jaame Masjid*. There are a number of historic mosques in Iran. The grand mosques in Esfahan, Shiraz, Kerman, Yazd, and Tabriz and the Goharshad Mosque in Mashhad are among the best known. Esfahan, one of 10 cities designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site, contains some of the oldest Islamic monuments. They include the Jaame Mosque, built during the 10th and 11th centuries, and the Royal Square, built by the Safavids. The two great mosques known as the Shah and Shaykh Lotfollah, built in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, face the square.

Husseiniyeh is another type of Shi'i religious building; this is a community building (like a mosque) where various religious rituals take place. However, as its



A view of the Fatima Masumeh Shrine square as people come to pray in May 2013. The shrine is located in Qom, Iran.
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name signifies, it is dedicated to the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussein (the Third Imam and the grandson of the Prophet) in the tragic battle of Karbala. In the old part of Iranian cities, every neighborhood usually has a *husseiniyeh*. *Abbassieh* and *zeinabieh* are similar buildings named after Abbass and Zeinab, Hussein's cousin and sister. The two are important figures in the tragedy of Karbala and its aftermath.

Both Shia and Sunni Muslims consider Mecca and Medina (in Saudi Arabia) to be the holiest cities. The most Shi'i sacred places and shrines in Iran can be found in the cities of an-Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra. The shrine of Ali (the First Imam, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet) in an-Najaf and the shrine of Hussein (the Third Imam) in Karbala are the most important shrines in Iraq. After the 1980s Iraq-Iran War, a large number of Iranian pilgrims began visiting holy places in Iraq. Following the invasion of Iraq, in the early 21st century, insecurity and sectarian violence in Iraq claimed the lives of many Iranians but did not slow the waves of sincere Iranian pilgrims to Iraq.

There are also a number of Shi'i holy sites in Iran. Among them are two shrines that attract millions of pilgrims from Iran and other countries throughout the world: the shrine of the Eighth Imam, Hazrat-e Imam Reza, located in Mashhad, and the shrine of Imam Ali Ibn Musa Al Reza's sister, Hazrat-e Masumeh, in Qom. Minor shrines, known as *imamzadeh*, are attributed to one or another of the descendants of Shia imams and can be found throughout the country. Imamzadehs are usually popular pilgrimage destinations for local populations. Two are particularly well known: Shahzadeh Abdulazim in Ray, south of Tehran, and Shah-e Cheraq in Shiraz. The Twelfth Imam, who is believed to be in occultation (concealment), has reportedly been seen in the region known as Jamkaran, which is located in the desert outside Qom. Despite many clergies rejecting such rumors, some devotees of the Twelfth Imam consider Jamkaran a holy area, and every week large crowds visit the region. They hold prayer ceremonies and night vigils, hoping that they may see him again or at least receive blessings from his spiritual presence.

WHAT IS SACRED The Holy Koran is considered a sacred text; therefore, Muslims must be in a religiously clean state when they touch it. This can be achieved through the ritual of *wudu*, prescribed washing procedures for the body. The clean status is also required for daily prayers.

The mosque is considered a sacred place in general, and four mosques in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem are considered especially sacred. For Muslims, Masjid al-Haram in Mecca—which embraces the Kaaba, a cube-shaped structure known as the House of God—is the most sacred place in the world. Because Muslims must face the House of God while they pray, all mosques around the world are built to face the city of Mecca. Masjid an-Nabi (the Prophet's mosque) in Medina is the second-most important mosque. The al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are other sacred places.

Shia Muslims have built shrines over the tombs of their imams and holy men and women in many parts of the Muslim world. These have become pilgrimage sites and are considered sacred places where pilgrims can receive blessings. The shrine of Ali (the First Imam) and the shrine of Hussein (the Third Imam), both located in Iraq, are especially important. Every year millions of Iranian pilgrims visit the shrine of Imam Reza (the Eighth Imam) in Mashhad, the only imam tomb in Iran. Another important Shi'i pilgrimage destination is the shrine of Zeinab, Hussein's sister, in Damascus.

Iranian Shias, like those elsewhere, venerate relics of the imams and their descendants. One of the most common blessed items for devout Iranian Shias is a shawl, which is a small piece of cloth, usually green in color, taken from the cover that drapes Imam Reza's tomb. This is a symbolic object that carries with it the blessings of the imam. The green shawl has gained political significance as it now signifies the Green Movement that erupted after the disputed results of the 2009 Iranian presidential election.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS Holidays and festivals in Iran draw on a combination of pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Shi'i cultures. Religious events are based on the Islamic lunar calendar, but this is not the official Iranian calendar. Instead, the Iranian calendar, the *taghvim-i hejri-i shamsi*, is a solar calendar derived from the ancient Zoroastrian calendar. However, it counts the years from the time when the Prophet Muhammad migrated to Medina.

Although many of the major religious holidays and festivals in Iran are the same as those of other Muslim countries, some are unique to Shia communities. One such example is Ashura day (the 10th of the month of Muharram), the day of the tragic martyrdom of Hussein,

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the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Hussein and his few companions were killed in the battle of Karbala in Iraq following a dispute over the legitimacy of the Ummayyad rule in the seventh century. From Shia Muslims' point of view, the tragic battle is more than a historic battle over a political dispute. It has transcended into meta-history and signifies the battle between right and wrong, justice and injustice. The tragedy and its commemoration play a fundamental role in Shi'i theology and culture. Every year the mourning commemoration begins on the first of Muharram and lasts for 50 days, until 40 days after Ashura day, on the day of Arba'ain (the 20th of the month of Safar). The commemoration mainly takes place during the first 10 days of Muharram and is particularly intensified during the seventh to 10th days of Muharram.

In addition, Shias hold a feast called Id al-Ghadir to commemorate the Prophet's designation of Ali as his legate and successor at a place called Ghadir-e Khomm (the pond of Ghadir). The birthdays of the Eighth and Twelfth Imams are also joyous occasions in Iran. The birthday of the Twelfth Imam, on the 15th of the month of Sha'ban, is currently a national holiday in Iran.

Iranians also celebrate national festivals that are based on pre-Islamic Zoroastrian customs. Although these festivals are of Zoroastrian origin, they were continued after the arrival of Islam. The most important one is Nowruz (also Naw-rouz), the Iranian new year, which falls on the first day of spring. The celebration includes such Zoroastrian customs as setting up a special table, *Haft Sin* (Seven Sins), with seven flowers, fruits, and herbs with names that begin with the letter *s* (*sin*). Muslim families include a copy of the Koran on the Haft Sin, and Islamic prayers are said at the table. The new year celebrations last for 13 days, until Sees-dah-bedar. On this day Iranian families celebrate with a picnic in the countryside. Another public holiday of Zoroastrian origins is Chahar-shanbeh-suri, held on the evening of the last Tuesday of the year. On this occasion people jump over bonfires while repeating a mantra that is believed to empty them of all distress as they gain energy and life from the fires. Although this ceremony is considered heretical by some Muslims, particularly outside Iran, it is a commonly accepted part of Iran's national culture and is not seen as violating Islamic doctrines or law.

Yalda, the longest night of the year, is yet another pre-Islamic festival celebrated in Iran. It has a history as long as the religion of Mithraism (practiced in the second and third centuries CE), however, the event lost its

religious significance after the arrival of Islam. Now observed mainly as a social occasion, Yalda brings together friends and families, who celebrate until late in the night. There is a tendency to revive Jashn-e Mehregan, a feast of thanksgiving at the autumn equinox, in the beginning of the 21st century, but its celebration is not widespread.

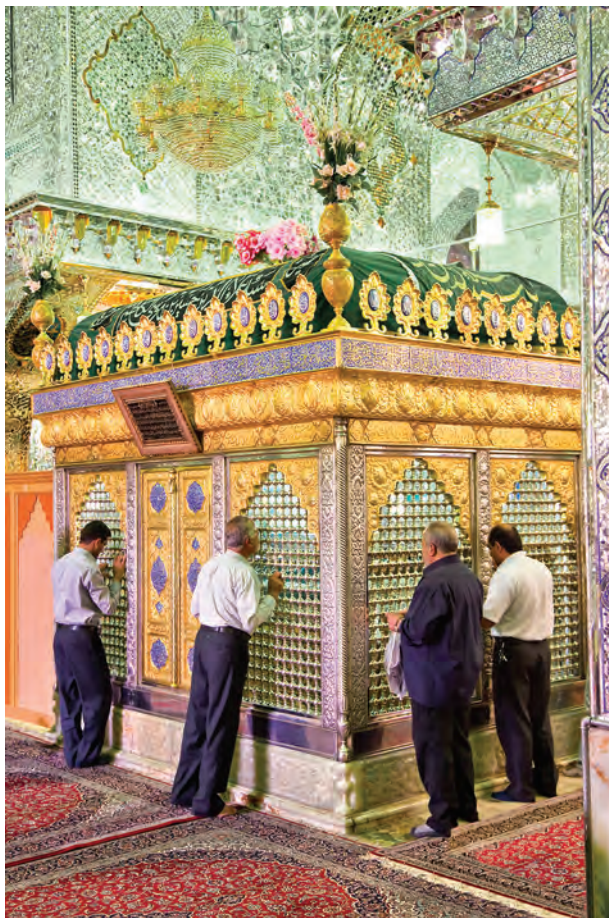
MODE OF DRESS The traditional form of hijab (veil) among urban Iranian Shia women has been the *chador*, a loose covering from head to toe that is held under the chin by one hand and wrapped tightly around, but not covering, the face. The chador traditionally was available in a variety of colors and forms, but since the 1979 revolution the most common color is black. Furthermore, the government now enforces a dress code that requires all women to wear the hijab in public. Men are expected to dress modestly in public.

Clergy are distinguished from laypersons in Iran by their dress, which includes a long gown (*aba*) and either a black or a white turban (*ammamah*). A black turban indicates that the person is a *sayyid*—that is, one who claims genealogical ties to a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

DIETARY PRACTICES Shia Muslims in Iran follow Islamic dietary regulations, such as abstaining from pork and alcohol. Animals must be slaughtered according to specific rules: a sharp knife is used to cut the throat without cutting the animal's spinal cord, and the blood from the animal's veins is completely drained. The body of the animal has to face the direction of Mecca while it is slaughtered. Sunni Muslims eat seafood, under the condition that the fish be caught alive from the sea. Shia Muslims, however, are permitted to eat prawn and scaled fish, similar to adherents of Judaism.

RITUALS As with Muslims elsewhere, Shias in Iran observe the Five Pillars of Islam, including worship, fasting during the month of Ramazan (Ramadan), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) at least once in a lifetime, if they can afford it. Shias also make pilgrimages to the shrines of imams. The *sufreb* (table), a thanksgiving ritual at which female clergy recite special prayers, is a popular female ritual in Iran.

RITE OF PASSAGE Among Shias in Iran it is customary for the family to hold a party to celebrate a newborn. This usually occurs around 10 days after birth, when the baby is given a name, and family and friends bring gifts.



Muslims pray in front of a tomb inside the Seyed Alaedin Hossein Shrine in April 2011 in Shiraz, Iran. © ALEKSANDAR TODOROVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Jashn-e Ibadat became a popular rite of passage for girls entering puberty; from that point on the girls are expected to observe religious commandments. Jashn-e Ibadat has been promoted by the state, and it mainly takes place in schools. At the ceremony, which is usually an all-female gathering, the girl says her prayers in public and recites passages from the Koran. This is followed by a celebration, at which the girl receives an embroidered head covering and a prayer mat. Traditionally, there was a parallel ceremony for boys held on the occasion of circumcision, which typically took place between six and 10 years of age. However, since the late 20th century boys are circumcised when they are newborns, and the occasion is rarely celebrated.

The traditional marriage ceremony lasted from three to seven days, with large gatherings and parties at the houses of both the bride and the groom. However, the

celebration period has since been shortened in large cities due to modern lifestyles. It begins with a small gathering at the home of the bride, where a clergy member officiates the wedding. A reception is held in a hotel, a public hall, or a private house.

There are at least three gatherings of mourning with the family of a deceased person. They are held on the third, seventh, and 40th days after death, and another gathering is held on the first anniversary of the death. The mourning family wears black for at least a few months.

MEMBERSHIP The majority of Iranians are Shia by birth, but conversion of people from other religions has always been welcome. In the 1950s and 1960s some Shia clergy and religious centers established organizations for promoting the religion. Rather than proselytizing to non-Muslims, however, they concentrated their efforts on strengthening the faith of the young against Bahá'í teachings and against the spread of secular ideologies. After the 1979 revolution the Sazman-e Tablighat-e Islami (Organization for Islamic Propaganda) was established as an official institution for promoting Islamic ideology both inside and outside Iran.

The Internet has typically been considered a sphere of political dissent in Iran. However, it has also changed the ways that Shia marjas (religious authorities) connect with their followers. Ayatollah Sistani, Ayatollah Saanei, and Ayatollah Noori Hamedani have Web sites, as do traditionalists such as Ayatollah Saafi Golpayegani. These sites are the cyber *bayet* (office) of marjas, where people can ask religious questions or even pay their religious tax. With the aim of overcoming geographical and linguistic barriers between marjas and their followers, the sites are usually available in Farsi, Arabic, and English, as well as French, Urdu, and Azari (Turkish). Although most social networking sites, including Facebook and Twitter, are filtered in Iran, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei maintains official Facebook and Twitter accounts.

SOCIAL JUSTICE Shi'i ideals of a just society and a just ruler were among the strongest sources of inspiration for the two revolutions of modern Iran, those of 1906–11 and 1979. Social welfare has long been the province of the Shia marjas (religious referees), who, as the recipients of religious taxes, have been responsible for distributing funds to the needy. Since the 1979 revolution, the Kumiteh-e Imdad-e Imam Khomeini (Imam Ruhollah

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Khomeini's Aid and Relief Committee), a nongovernmental organization, has collected charity donations nationwide for relief projects, health care, and housing for the underprivileged. Iran's holy shrines, particularly that of the Eighth Imam (Imam Reza), have enormous endowments that operate charitable foundations specifically designated to help the poor. Throughout the country a large number of popular societies and orphanages are run in the names of various imams. The societies constitute a wide network of nongovernmental charitable organizations that provide, among other assistance, no-interest loans for such purposes as marriage, buying a house, and education.

SOCIAL LIFE The requirements and constraints of modern life have dictated a different ethic of social relations than those traditionally found in Iran. Nevertheless, the family continues to constitute the most important social unit of society. Marriage, a tradition encouraged by the Prophet Muhammad, is considered to be a holy bond. Children are treasured, and the elderly are generally taken care of within the extended family.

Although families seek compatible marriage partners for their children, and though their views may affect the final choice, there are no arranged marriages as such in early-21st-century Iran. Polygamy, once outlawed, was reintroduced with minor restrictions after the 1979 revolution. The practice of *mutah*, temporary marriage for a period determined by the couple, is allowed in Shiite law and practiced by some. Polygamy and *mutah* carry social stigmas, however, and are not widespread in Iran. Marriage is viewed as a kind of contract that can be broken (through divorce). The conditions of breaking the contract tend to be in favor of men, making this a controversial subject in Iran. Efforts by women's rights organizations have resulted in changes in the early 21st century, including custody rights for mothers in special cases and greater financial support for wives after divorce.

Shia marjas have taken an unusually flexible approach to issues such as transsexuality and infertility treatments. Transsexuality was not officially addressed in Iran before the 1979 revolution. This changed in 1987 when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (religious statement) allowing sex reassignment surgery. Thereafter, the Iranian government not only supported but also provided financial assistance for those undergoing sex reassignment surgery. Iranian surgeons were pioneers in using cutting-edge techniques, and, after Thailand, Iran

became the second country in the world to carry out sex change operations. Iranian marjas also allowed diverse infertility treatments, including egg and sperm donation.

POLITICAL IMPACT Iran is a distinctly Shia Muslim country, with Shiism constituting one of the central components of national identity and culture. Its distinction as a Shia nation, however, has sometimes produced isolation, if not hostility, from its Sunni Muslim neighbors. Nonetheless, its large Muslim population, rich oil resources, and strategic location in the Middle East make Iran an undeniable force in regional and global politics.

Since the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979, Shia clerics have exercised an unprecedented role in Iranian politics under the system of government known as *vilayat-e faqih* (guardianship of jurists), a form of theocracy. This political shift had two significant consequences. First, as Shia jurists became involved in governing the country, their perspective shifted from that of a cleric to that of a politician. Therefore, some famous Iranian jurists, including Ayatollah Saneai, have issued revolutionary religious statements on the rights of women and religious minorities. Second, the institution of religious seminaries (*Hozeh*), which was a polarized system and independent from the state, has fundamentally changed in Iran. After the 1979 revolution, clerics enjoyed political power, and the seminaries became a source of power. The Islamic state then began to heavily finance the seminaries, which resulted in the suppression of any ideas that were different from the official reading of the Shia Islam. In response, in the mid-1990s a group of religious scholars formed to push for the independence of religious institutions from state influences. Out of this bloomed a reform movement aimed at reducing the power of the conservative ruling clergy and implementing a more moderate version of Islam in politics and society.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES During certain periods in Iranian history, religion has inspired women to take an active role in social and political events, such as the revolutions of 1906–11 and 1979. Women had a particularly significant presence in the Green Movement during the postelection protests in 2009. However, progress in the development of women's rights has been neither swift nor significant. There are various reasons for this, some cultural, some political, some religious, and some involving the regional situation of women in general.

Under the secular modernization of the Pahlavi dynasty (1926–79), the status of women in Iran improved to an unprecedented degree. With the advent of the Islamic Republic, however, there came a backlash, and a number of social and legal restraints were reimposed. Nevertheless, women's rights are more widely accepted in Iran than in many other countries in the region. Iranian women have continued to seek greater social recognition and legal rights. There are a number of women in parliament and among senior government positions. Several women's organizations and women's rights groups also exist. Indeed, activists for women's rights, so-called Islamic feminists, represent one of the strongest religio-political forces in the country pushing for democratic reforms. Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer, won the Noble Peace Prize in 2003. She was cited particularly for her efforts to improve the rights of women and children and for representing dissidents against the government.

Although abortion is considered a sin by Shi'i law and is legally banned in Iran, it is permitted in the event that the mother's life is endangered. Several methods of birth control are legally available to Iranian couples.

CULTURAL IMPACT Before the advent of film and television, and long before the adoption of Western-style theaters, *ta'ziyehs* (religious passion plays) were the only popular form of performance art in Iran. The *ta'ziyeh* reenacted the events of the Battle of Karbala, in which the Imam Hussein and his few companions were martyred. Traditional music and literature in Iran are highly influenced by religious and mystical themes and by the rhetoric of love, ecstasy, and sacrifice for the sake of the beloved.

Work on holy shrines and mosques has attracted the best Iranian artisans, who have made these sites masterpieces of architecture. Mosques are distinguished by their large, round domes and by two high minarets that are decorated with Persian designs made of blue tiles. Iranian artists excel in the painting of miniatures, in calligraphy, and in work in gold, silver, and glass.

Other Religions

Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are officially recognized minorities in Iran. The Bahá'ís living in Iran do not have legal status and are denied civil rights.

Sunni Muslims in Iran are mainly associated with ethnic groups concentrated in the provinces of Kurdistan

(northwest) and Sistan and Baluchestan (southeast). The Turkmans, an ethnic group in the north of the country, are also Sunni Muslims. The majority of the population in southern ports and islands, such as Qeshm Island, are also Sunni. The constitution of Iran recognizes the main four Sunni schools of law, and Sunni Muslims have the right to perform their religious rites and practice their own canons. In the early 21st century the population of Sunni Muslims has not been officially announced. However, considering the regions where the Sunni population is concentrated, estimates range around 5 million (based on the 2011 national census).

People of the Book—Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—are recognized as protected religious minorities. Since the seventh century, when Islam became the official religion of Persia, these religious groups have lived in Iran according to the regulations set by Islamic law. The Iranian constitutions of 1911 and 1979 recognized the religious and cultural autonomy of these minorities and granted them the right to be represented in the national parliament by a proportional number of elected deputies.

The Christian community is the largest of these minorities but makes up less than 0.3 percent of the population. The population is spread throughout the country, but its members are mostly concentrated in the cities of Esfahan, Tehran, Orumiyyeh, Tabriz, and Ahvaz. Iranian Christians are predominantly Orthodox; they are divided along several ethnic and confessional groups, such as Armenian, Assyrian, and Chaldean, each with various denominations that include Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Russian Orthodox.

Armenians constitute the largest Christian population, and probably the largest non-Muslim community, in Iran. The presence of the Armenian population dates to the early 17th century, when Shah Abbas, the Safavid monarch, transferred large groups of people from Armenia to Iran for political and economic reasons. They were settled in Julfa, on the outskirts of Esfahan, where they rebuilt their community and contributed enormously to Iranian culture and industry. Some of their oldest churches in Julfa, such as Vank and Bethlehem, are among the most frequently visited historical monuments.

The presence of Jews in Persian territory dates back to at least as early as the fourth century BCE, when Cyrus the Great conquered the Babylonian empire. While maintaining a distinctive identity throughout the centuries, Jews have participated in various aspects of Iranian life,

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particularly in business and trade. The Jewish population is concentrated mainly in Tehran and in the cities of Shiraz, Hamadan, and Esfahan.

Iran was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion named for the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathushtra), who is believed to have lived between 1800 and 1000 BCE in what is now northeastern Iran. From 559 BCE to 642 CE, Zoroastrianism was the official religion of three Persian empires: the Achaemenian, Parthian, and Sasanian. After the Muslim Arab conquest of Iran in the middle of the seventh century, Zoroastrianism gradually lost its dominance. At the beginning of the 21st century Zoroastrians in Iran were concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Yazd, Kerman, Esfahan, Shiraz, Zahedan, and Ahvaz, where centers of worship were located. In Yazd there was an Atesh-e Behram, a fire temple of the highest level of sanctity; other fire temples with varying degrees of sanctity can be found in other cities.

All of the legally recognized religious minorities in Iran have associations that take care of the general affairs of their communities. These include such organizations as social and sporting clubs, publishing enterprises, and private schools, all of which provide venues for protecting and promoting cultural distinctiveness and communal life. Personal and family matters, such as marriage, divorce, the custody of children, and inheritance, are dealt with by various committees under the supervision of the religious authorities of each community. The rulings of these committees then go to a civil court for official approval.

Because these religions have long existed in Iran, they have had a considerable impact on Iranian life and culture. The most significant impact, however, has come from Zoroastrianism, evident particularly in the country's national holidays. Through ancient myths and epics, Zoroastrian ideas and characters have found their way into Iranian literature and art, and some Zoroastrian concepts appear in Muslim ethical, philosophical, and mystical discourse. It is a well-accepted tradition for Iranian Muslims to name their children after figures in Zoroastrian mythology.

Bahá'ís are the only unrecognized religious minority in Iran, due to both political and religious reasons. As such, adherents of the Bahá'í faith do not enjoy constitutional rights. Since the religion's origin in the 19th century, political allegations have been made against Bahá'ís, including their alleged association with foreign powers. In the 19th century, for example, Bahá'ís were charged with being agents of British imperialism. Since

the mid-20th century they have been linked with the United States and with Zionism, charges that resulted from the support and protection Bahá'ís received during the 1970s under Mohammad Reza Shah, the last Pahlavi monarch. A more important motivation for outlawing the Bahá'í tradition in Iran, however, has been religious. The Bahá'í belief in continuing revelations, in an open-ended succession of manifestations of God through prophets (including Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the tradition), contradicts one of the fundamental beliefs of Islam: that Muhammad was the final prophet. Thus, the public persecution and even executions of Bahá'ís have always been justified by charges of heresy and apostasy. Nonetheless, the Bahá'í faith has found both rural and urban followers inside Iran.

The Mandeans are a unique and small religious community in Khuzestan province, in southwestern Iran. This religious sect of antiquity has a long background in Iran and Iraq. Mandaism testifies to a basic framework of dualism in which good and evil and light and darkness clash but also intertwine and, to some extent, recognize one another's claims. Baptism, as the most significant ritual for Mandeans, can take place only in flowing water such as rivers, which are fed from the celestial World of Light. Therefore, this ancient Middle Eastern community has always settled on the riverbanks of the Lower Euphrates and Tigris in southern Iraq and in Khuzestan, where the largest rivers of Iran flow.

Although this ancient religion has been neglected as a Christian sect, the Mandeans believe that Adam was their first prophet—the first to receive the religious instructions of the Mandeans. Their last great teacher was John the Baptist. The origins of both the people and of the religion are a continuing mystery. Nonetheless, the Mandeans have a long historical background in Shushtar and Dezful, two historical cities in Khuzestan located on the banks of the Karun and Dez rivers. Writer William Kennett Loftus, who visited Dezful in 1852, reported that about 30 families of Mandeans lived in the city. At the beginning of the early 21st century, there was only a small community of Mandeans in Ahwaz, a provincial city of Khuzestan where the Karun River flows. The Mandeans are known as Sabaeans in Iran but are called Subbiyun in Khuzestan.

Forough Jabanbakhsb
Revised by Reza Masoudi Nejad

See Also Vol. I: *Islam, Shiism*

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