

The Power of Geography

Reading Guide for Chapter 2, Iran

“Islam is political. Or it is nothing.”

–Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

“From now on it is I who will name the government.”

–Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

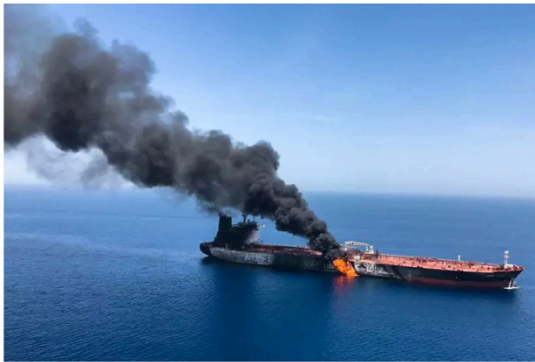
The first pages of the chapter explain how the geography of Iran, particularly the mountain ranges that ring the country and its interior deserts, protects and restrains Iran.

Until 1935 Iran was known as **Persia**.

Iran is not ethnically homogeneous. Mainly Persian, it contains Kurds, Balochis, Turkmen, Azeris, Armenians, Arabs, Circassians, Lur tribal people, and even a tiny community of Jews.

Energy is Iran’s most important export. It holds the 4th largest oil reserves on earth and second-largest reserves of natural gas. Much of it must pass through the **Strait of Hormuz**.

“We will make the enemy understand that either everyone can use the Strait of Hormuz or no one.”



Explosions that damaged two tankers south of the Strait of Hormuz on June 13, 2019 come a month after four vessels were targeted in "sabotage attacks" off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. ISNA/Handout via REUTERS

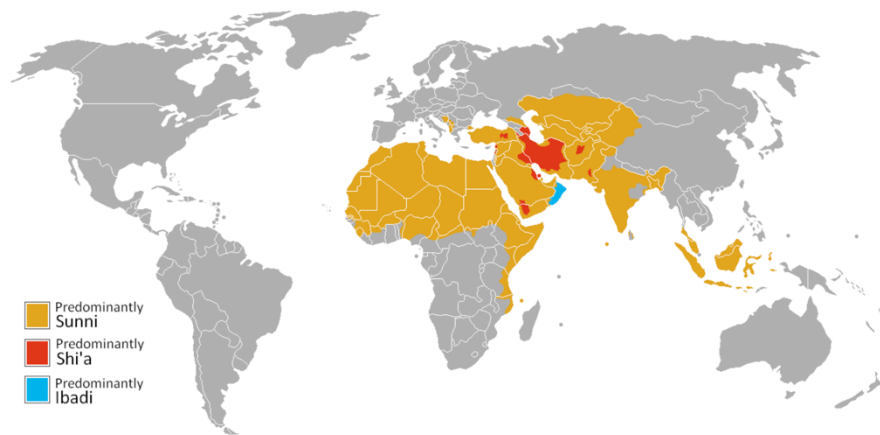
Click [here](#) for a short video explaining the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz:

A summary of Persian history... “Modern Iran is a troubled nation, but one with a great history.”

Marshall explains the establishment of Shi’ism as the official religion of **Safavid Persia**. *This section is especially important to understanding the Middle East back then—and today.*



The split between the majority **Sunni** (85% of all Muslims) and the **Shi’a** (15%). The Persians adopted Shi’ism to distinguish themselves from the other Muslim powers, which were Sunni.



Shi'ism's origins, in a nutshell: There were those followers of **Muhammad** who, upon Muhammad's unexpected death in 632, believed his son **Ali** should have succeeded him as the next leader, or **Caliph**. But another was chosen. (The resentment simmered for decades, even though Ali was eventually chosen to be Caliph—and subsequently assassinated.) Then in 680 Ali's son **Hussein** (Muhammad's grandson) was martyred at a place called **Karbala** (in modern-day Iraq). His death is commemorated every year.



A re-enactment of the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali at the hands of Yazid in 680.

How devout are the Shi'a? Read about **the festival of Ashura**. Click [here](#) to see a short video of the celebration of Ashura in Karbala in 2021.

A brief history of Iran, from the fall of the Safavid Dynasty in 1722 through the end of World War I. Persia was neutral during WWI, but the British, German, Russian, & Turkish forces all wanted controlling influence of Persia.

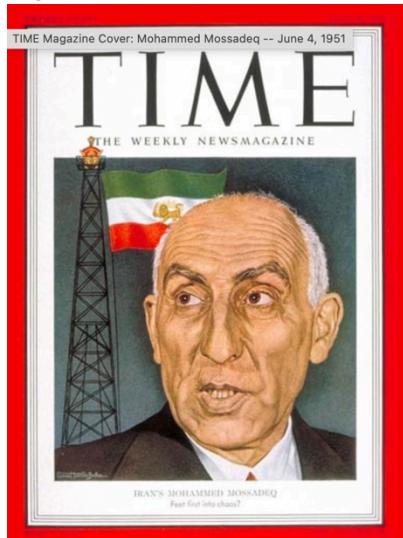
The discovery of oil in 1909 was a huge development. The British interest kept heavy influence in Iran through their Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later British Petroleum, or BP).

Reza Shah Pahlavi assumed power in Iran in 1921 but the British kept heavy influence via the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

In World War II Iran remained neutral, but oil was now v important to the war efforts, and the USSR and the British forced the Shah out in favor of his son, **Mohammed Reza Pahlavi**.

Anti-colonial sentiment was growing in Iran, especially after the CIA & MI6, fearing Soviet influence in Iran, supported Iranian factions in deposing in 1953 the Prime Minister **Mohammad Mossadegh**, who had intended to take control of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

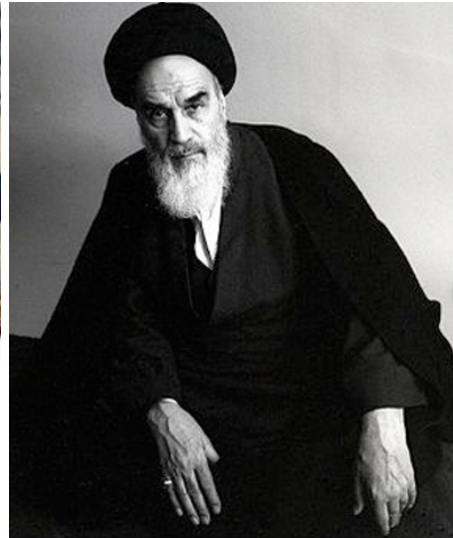
Marshall briefly summarizes how the coup 'd etat turned Iran toward the **Iranian Revolution of 1979** led by religious cleric **Ayatollah Khomeini**.



Mohammad Mossadegh



Shah Reza Pahlavi



Ayatollah Khomeini

“The ayatollah arrived to a rapturous welcome as more than a million people lined the streets to greet him. What most did not know was that they had exchanged the crown for the turban.”

Khomeini's was a religious revolution, advocating violent jihad to defeat “crusaders and Zionists.” The revolution was a violent, repressive theocracy. Women's rights were suppressed. Thousands of the middle class fled if they could.

The Iranian **Revolutionary Guard** = a “thuggish militia” that intimidated opponents.

The Iran-Iraq War, 1981-1989 Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq saw Iran as a threat. A war of attrition. A horror for both armies. Trench warfare, mustard gas, one million dead. Ended in stalemate.



The next 12 pages are a summary (1997-2021) of the internal power struggles and Iran's growing regional rivalries versus Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Israel...

...of the failed attempts of moderates to assume control

...the fixed election of 2021 placing Ebrahim Raisi in power. The leadership saw Iran inside a “**Sunni circle**” threatening Iran.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 to oust Saddam Hussein was a mistake in numerous ways. For one, it allowed Iran to make alliances with Shi'a militias across the region –like **Hezbollah** in Lebanon and in **Syria** in order to undermine Sunni states' influence, particularly **Saudi Arabia**.

The country Iran most despises is **Israel**. Iran sees the U.S. as the “**Great Satan**” and Israel as the “**Little Satan**,” which is partly why Iran has been working to build nuclear weapons.

The reformist **Rouhani** government briefly dabbled with President Obama in 2015, leading to the signing of a nuclear-arms accord. and the threat of Sunni-led ISIS made for a common enemy for both Iran and the U.S., but that thawing of relations did not last.

President Trump nixed the deal in 2017, and imposed economic sanctions on Iran. The result at home was that the Iranian hardlines reimposed their will. The **Revolutionary Guard** crushes domestic resistance violently and is set to assume control over the government.



Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Cadets



Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani, killed in 2020 by an American drone strike

Iran today is a revolutionary theocracy – Iran is a Shi'ia Islamic theocracy. The leadership believes it is “enforcing God’s will on Earth.” One doesn’t compromise God’s plan .

Still, the increasingly young populations “chafes against a system more in tune with the sixteenth century than the twenty-first.”

“The religious revolutionaries do not intend to give up their revolution.”