

*Understanding*  
IRAN

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW,  
FROM PERSIA TO  
THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC,  
FROM CYRUS TO AHMADINEJAD

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# FOREWORD



uring the Cold War, mathematicians and economists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were searching for a means to understand and evaluate trends and events in the conflict. Borrowing from the German army, they hit on the “war game,” the *kriegspiel*. What the German General Staff used for essentially tactical military simulations, they elaborated to deal with politics as well as military confrontations. Their “politico-military” version of the war game became a popular tool in university courses on world affairs as well as in the government.

The assumption behind the “game” was that it would enable one to predict reactions to events in an evolving series of “moves”—for example, how “Blue Team” should react to a threatened attack by “Red Team,” followed by how “Red Team” would then respond, and so on. War games were used to analyze the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in which I played a small role; they have been repeatedly used since that great event and have been employed to predict reactions in the current conflict between the American-led coalition and Iran. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of war games have been “played” by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Central Command (the combined army, air, and naval forces assigned the military role on the frontiers of Iran) to ascertain how much pressure or threat would be required to force Iran to give up its nuclear program and to otherwise not challenge American hegemony in the Middle East.

I find many faults in war gaming, but for my purposes here, two are particularly important. First, implicit in each “scenario” was that conflict was the norm: It was threat, followed by attack and either surrender or counter-attack, that was assumed to constitute relations among nations. Second, war gaming assumed that the logic of actions and reactions was so clear that, regardless of whom the opposing teams were presumed to represent, they

would always react “logically,” guided by a balance sheet of potential profit and loss. Gaming thus views the foreigner as a sort of accountant—culturally disembodied, mathematically precise, and governed by logic. If he does not *add them up accurately* (as the mathematicians taught us to say), then he has “miscalculated.” In short, the game posits in him precisely those qualities that do *not* shape our actions.

All other considerations—culture, religion, and memory of historical experience—were essentially irrelevant. So when we apply the lessons of war games to “grand strategy” in our culturally diverse world, the results of the war game are nearly always misleading. It is, in part, my belief that war gaming as a means to understand foreign affairs is fatally flawed that led me to write this book. My aim has been to bring forward what war games omit: in short, what it means when we speak of Iran and Iranians.

I begin in Chapter One, “Becoming Iranian,” with how the people we know today as Iranians became a distinct cultural group. Since these people are sometimes called Persians, I must clarify what is meant by the words *Iranian* and *Persian*. To simplify, I call the people who live in Iran “Iranians,” just as I would say that those who live in the United States are “Americans.” But just as American society is composed of subsets of different groups—Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Catholics, Protestants of many varieties, Jews, and Muslims—so Iran is inhabited by peoples who think of themselves as Persians, Turkmens, Arabs, Kurds, Lurs, and various others; followers of different faiths—Shiis, Sunnis, Jews, Christians, Bahais, and Zoroastrians; and people who earn their livelihood in different ways—peasants, nomads, and city people. However, as in America and also in Iran, one cultural group has, so far at least, stamped the whole society with its culture. The early American colonists were mainly English and thus stamped the evolving society with their language and their culture; in Iran, the first dominant group was the ancient people we call Persians, whose Farsi is the dominant language of Iran.

In America, the English-Protestant basis of culture has been transformed over time. The early Americans had to make way for new groups and their ideas. This was also true for Iran: group after group, mainly Arabs and Turks, followed the Indo-European peoples into Iran. Recognizing their diverse background but also anxious to overcome ethnic divisions, today’s inhabi-

tants prefer to use as the neutral term Iranian. Indeed, they were ordered to do so by their then king, Reza Shah, in 1935.

*Iran* has had one of the world's richest and most fascinating historical experiences. One should ask, How much of it is pertinent today? Do Iranians today really remember their past over the last two thousand or so years? Or is this book just a historian's contrived assemblage of events?

My answer is twofold: Much of even the remote past *is* directly remembered by modern Iranians because it is being constantly reinforced—to a degree and with an intensity alien to the Western experience—by the repetition of poetry, folktales, and ceremony. Moreover, national history is studied everywhere and often in Iranian schools, colleges, and universities. Additionally, much is encapsulated in the pervasive and passionate religious observance of the Iranians' Shia sect of Islam.

That is the easy part of my answer; I illustrate it in the following pages. The harder part is what Carl Jung called “the collective unconscious”—the real but hidden memory of what a society accepts as its heritage and the guide to what is “normal.” It is this shared substratum of heritage that makes a society distinct. We are guided by it in our choice of what is right and proper, but it is so common that we normally pay no attention to it unless we lose it. What it amounts to is, of course, much harder to document, but we may take it as the summation of the historical experience. I attempt to bring it out by using the historical events as building blocks for my interpretation of Iran.

Related to the collective unconscious—indeed, evolving from it—is what political philosophers have sometimes referred to as the “social contract.” That is a crucial but often elusive concept. To put it simply, the social contract is the implicit relationship of a people to one another, to their institutions, and to their leaders. Such an understanding usually evolves over a long period of time as changing circumstances cause shifts in the internal relationships. Sometimes such a contract is made explicit. In the American experience, the social contract was made explicit in the Pilgrims' first document, the Mayflower Compact, and, later, when America's Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution.

Underlying these documents was an implicit agreement on what was “right.” If this agreement is overthrown, as occasionally happens in revolutions and wars, then military or police power becomes a paltry force. Put in

more familiar circumstances, if the implicit social contract of, say, the inhabitants of Dallas were to be overturned, the whole American army could not keep the peace there. That is exactly what happened in Iran in the months preceding the 1979 revolution: The huge army and security apparatus of Muhammad Reza Shah could no longer control even Tehran. I mention this here to point out that underneath the events we can document in history are other, more intangible mores, conventions, and habits that are real, effective, and pervasive. Thus, for reasons I make clear in this book, I am certain that the inhabitants of Iran today are largely governed by their past regardless of whether they consciously remember it. Because Americans and the British are not part of that heritage, I attempt to make explicit what to Iranians is largely implicit. Thus, I have offered you in this book what might be termed a historical portrait rather than a chronology or a fully spelled-out history.

*W*hy is this worth considering? The humane reason is that we live in a world whose manifest diversity both challenges our understanding and enriches our lives. It would be boring if everyone in the world actually was, as the war gamers profess, interchangeable. A great civilization, Iran is special. The great English scholar of things Persian, Edward G. Browne, at the beginning of the last century compared Iran to a “beautiful garden filled with flowers of innumerable kinds” and remarked that nothing could “compensate the world, spiritually and intellectually, for the loss of Persia.”

I agree with him—enjoyment of diversity is enriching to life—but in these difficult times in which we live, I would urge that there is also a practical purpose in figuring out how to get along with people whose cultural guides are different. To put it in crass terms, what will be the reaction of the Iranians, who are governed by a cultural code that is not that of America or Britain, to the threat of force? Fifty years ago, answering that question was a challenge to British strategists who sought to hang on to their oil fields in Iran. They failed. Today, understanding what the Iranians will do in response to threats and incentives, particularly on the nuclear issue, is the challenge that the American government is attempting to meet, so far unsuccessfully. The war gamers would have us believe that Iranian beliefs, mores, and memories are irrelevant, or nearly so. Such a view could mislead us into disaster. But the danger is certainly clear and present today—we can see by current events that Iranians have not reacted as we assumed they would. Perversely,

they refuse to act like Americans or the British, and their reactions often appear to us not to be governed by “logic.” They are people, not “players.”

Thus, as I write, American and British strategists debate whether the application of threats, imposition of more severe sanctions, or actual employment of force will convince the Iranian government to abstain from attempts to acquire a nuclear weapon. They assume that if threats do not work, sanctions might. If relatively mild sanctions do not work, then more severe measures might. That line of action leads next to a blockade, which is, in itself, an act of war. Ultimately, if none of these measures work, bombardment and invasion will.

Let’s leave aside moral and legal considerations and focus just on the issue of effectiveness. As stage after stage in the growing and extremely dangerous—indeed potentially catastrophic—confrontation has been reached, Iran has moved steadily forward with its own plan. So it seems reasonable and useful to ask, Why is its reaction to this pressure what we see it to be? I seek to answer that question in terms of the Iranian experience. Because both the answer and the experience are complex, I use history to construct what the intelligence analysts call an “appreciation” of Iran.

*I* propose, therefore, that you both enjoy the Iranians for the many fascinating experiences embodied in their past and also move toward a world in which we can all live in a greater degree of peace and security. Please join me in both of these quests.

*William R. Polk*  
*March 7, 2009*

# One

## BECOMING IRANIAN

Who were the ancestors of today's Iranians? How did they get to what we today call Iran? How did the first of them become "Persian"?

Answering these queries is the first mission of this book. I start as close to the "beginning" as is possible in order to establish a base from which we can examine the complex evolution of the modern Iranians.

For thousands of years before human events were recorded, Central Asia functioned as a giant heart, pumping periodic jets of nomadic tribesmen into Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. Why they left their original homelands is unknown and the sagas of their migrations are obscured by "the mists of time," so we see them only once they have arrived at their destinations.

The earliest of the peoples about whom we have at least some information spoke languages in the family we know as Dravidian. The Central Asian heart pulsed along arteries that led south and west. As they pushed outward, tribesmen established themselves on a broad arc of territory ranging from the Indus River in what is today Pakistan, where in the centuries around 2500 BC they founded a flourishing urban culture composed of hundreds of cities and towns, through Iran, further across Anatolia, and perhaps all the way to Italy, where they may have been the people we know as Rome's teachers and rivals, the Etruscans. In these various places, they created what were the first great civilizations. They laid the foundation stones of history.



Following on the heels of the Dravidian speakers were the first groups of another great wave. These nomadic peoples spoke languages from the family of which both English and Persian are members; we call them Indo-Europeans.<sup>1</sup>

What particularly distinguished the Indo-Europeans from the Dravidians was that, sometime around four thousand years ago, they managed to domesticate the horse. That accomplishment enabled them to move rapidly over vast distances and gave them overwhelming military superiority over more sedentary peoples. Mounted on or pulled by horses, they fanned out over much of Asia and Europe beginning about 2000 BC. We can follow their movements today by the telltale markers of DNA inherited by their descendants.

As they moved, they interacted with already resident peoples so that, over centuries, they gradually became Greeks, Romans, Germans, Slavs, Indians, and Persians. Much later, as other waves followed, they would become the ancestors of the French, Spaniards, Scandinavians, and English. So they are part of the bloodline from which most of us are also descended.

The Indo-European-speaking nomads shared veneration for the animal that had made their migrations possible, the horse. It became their “magical animal,” or totem. One of the great nomadic groups that invaded Europe, the Goths, took their name from their word for “horses.” Another group, ancestors of the Persians, used personal names derived from their word for “horses.” Around the horse, Romans, Greeks, Indians, and Persians, among others, elaborated rituals that exemplified religion, defined politics, and even governed foreign relations. The first great Persian king was commemorated by the sacrifice of a horse each month at his tomb, and Indian kings regulated their frontiers periodically by allowing a horse to run wild among them. Horses even gave our ancestors their distinctive drink—one that Central Asian nomads still relish—*khumiss*, fermented mare’s milk.

As important as it was, the horse was just one of a trio of developments that enabled the Indo-Europeans to shape world history. The second of the three great innovations was the light two- or four-wheeled chariot, which came into use sometime around 1800 BC. In fact, the oldest written document in an Indo-European language is a manual on training chariot horses. Riding on a chariot, even a few warriors could achieve tactical superiority over a much more numerous but immobile infantry force. Like the modern tank, the horse-drawn carriage was widely adopted by friend and foe. Horse-

drawn chariots became both the symbols and reality of military victory. The charioteers, known as *rathaeshstars*, soon formed a new social class similar in status and function to medieval European knights.

The third of the revolutionary changes was the weapon that would dominate warfare for nearly three thousand years—the bow. Possibly because they did not have suitable wood in sufficient quantities, the Central Asian nomads invented the most powerful variety, the compound bow, which got its strength from the use of bone and sinew in the shaft. Homer makes managing to pull it the arbiter among Odysseus' rivals for Penelope, and the Egyptian pharaoh Amen-hotep II brags that there was no one among his soldiers who could draw his bow. Its later adaptation, the crossbow, was regarded as so lethal a weapon that when it was introduced into Europe in the twelfth century AD, the Church banned it for warfare among Christians. The bow was the original weapon of mass destruction.

What the Indo-Europeans first brought to Iran from Central Asia in those dim early times set the theme for much of later history. Everywhere they went, they overwhelmed existing societies. Because of the horse, the chariot, and the compound bow, we and the modern Iranians are distant cousins.

*I*t was not only weapons of war that the Indo-Europeans brought to the West: They also brought religious ideas that, as I later elaborate, deeply influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The original religion of the Indo-Europeans focused on the great forces of nature, which—as nomadic herdsman, exposed as they were to rain, lightning, thunder, and wind—their shamans personified as gods. We know them best from the Greek and Norse myths and legends as Zeus (the sky god), Apollo (the sun god), and Poseidon (the earthquake god).

The nomads merged their religion, as they did their language and their “magic animal,” into the cults and practices of the people among whom they settled—the local, agricultural peoples. The religions of the settled peoples they encountered in Iran, India, Greece, and elsewhere were more closely tied to the earth because the people were so bound to it. What mattered most to them was what they believed controlled the production of crops. Thus, while the nomadic religion had no permanent holy sites but was drawn from the ever-changing forces of nature, the religion of the settled

people was fixed in sanctuaries of sacred groves, rivers, caves, and mountains. Over time, the two schemes—the “sky” and the “earth” religions—merged in new and diverse patterns and gave birth to new visions of the spirit world.

As they became more sophisticated, the Indo-Europeans and their new kinsmen underwent a major change in their religion. How it happened, we do not know, but the primitive Central Asian “sky religion” and its modification with the addition of “earth religions” began to be recast or reinterpreted, presumably first by tribal shamans. A whole range of new questions began to be posed. How had life begun? What was man’s relationship to the unseen powers? How could people protect themselves in the dangerous world? How could they ward off or prepare for death? The general answer of the shamans was that the gods must be appeased by ritual, prayer, and sacrifice. From this beginning, what gradually took shape among the people who would become Persians was an urbane, complex, and sophisticated cultural pattern that would underlie the actions of successive Iranian rulers and their societies for centuries and, in broad outline, still exists today as the Zoroastrian religion. It would also contribute to shaping the Shia Islamic religion that today molds Iranian life. The religion that the great Persian prophet Zoroaster began to codify was the first coherent cosmology and theology.<sup>2</sup>

Although there are many myths and legends about Zoroaster, we know almost nothing about him, not even when he lived. Scholars have put forward guesses that are a thousand years apart—anywhere between roughly 1500 and 500 BC. What he said was memorized and repeated until written down long after his life; those writings contain thoughts and descriptions suggesting that he lived when the Indo-European invasions had begun but before the Medes and Persians arrived in Iran (i.e., perhaps around 1200 BC). So completely, however, was he to encapsulate the yearnings, beliefs, and fears of the Persians that his doctrine, finally set forth in the *Avesta*, became the Iranian “church” for hundreds of years—and it is still extant in Iran and India (where its followers are called Parsees)—and it deeply influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. So to understand the Persians and today’s Iranians, we need to understand Zoroastrianism.

Zoroaster proclaimed that there was a single god, Ahura Mazda (also called Ohrmazd), who was the creator of both the physical world (*getig*) and the spiritual world (*menog*). The fundamental question that Zoroaster confronted—the question that prophets and theologians of all religions must at-

tempt to answer—was: If there is a supreme being who is beneficent, why do we experience evil, sickness, and death?

What we all seek, health, happiness, eternal life, what Zoroaster called “The Truth” (*asha*) obviously had not prevailed on earth; the “Lie,” or Evil remained. Because people suffered and died, it was clear, he believed, that there were two forces at work: The Good comes directly from the supreme god, Ahura Mazda, who dwells in the “Abode of Light.” Opposed to the supreme god, but also created by him, was disorder, untruth, and evil, known as *drug*. *Drug* was the preserve of Ahriman, the Devil, whose abode is darkness. Ahriman and his henchmen, the *daevas*, oppose humanity’s well-being and seek to corrupt the *ashavan*, those the King James version of the Old Testament calls “the Righteous.” Ahriman and his devils and fiends employed magic and greed to entice the *drugvant*, the human wicked, or, as the Quran calls them, the “corrupters of the Earth” (*al-fasiduna ‘ala’l-ard*) to tempt the Righteous.

Human life is thus a struggle between good and evil, *asha* and *drug*. In this struggle, humankind is not passive; each living person has a role to play. Indeed, man was created precisely to play this role, and, willing or not, he must do so. Some humans will be *drugvant*, and the *ashavan* must struggle against them. The outcome of their contest is ultimately predestined: Ahura Mazda will prevail. But this final victory in the far-distant future does not relieve the living from their tasks. They can take heart from the belief that, on “the Last Day” (the *rasho-keretfi* or *frashgird*), a world savior or messiah, the *Soshyant*, will return to earth to raise the dead and judge them, passing them through holy fire to burn away their sins.

What Zoroaster taught was that, although originally all creation was at rest, it was set in motion in a sort of “big bang” to create the physical world as we know it. At that point, the cycle of life and death, the daily motion of the sun across the sky, and the parade of seasons were begun. That first day, although the original meaning is now forgotten, is known in Persian as *No Ruz*, and it is still celebrated as a feast of joy with the coming of spring on March 21 each year.

Many incidental notions that figure in later religious thought first occur in the *Avesta*. The notion of a “poor man of good will,” the *dregush*, seems to have been a sort of forerunner of the later Muslim *dervish*. The concept of ritual cleanliness and ritual cleaning carries over into Hinduism and Islam and is particularly strong in Judaism. The belief that God has ordained a code of life, the Law, incumbent on every living person is particularly strong in Islam.

The idea of the Last Day is echoed in the Bible and is believed by religious fundamentalists throughout the Western world today. Fire (*atakhsh*), particularly central to Zoroastrianism and present in its temples as an emanation of the divinity, will, on the Last Day, cleanse or punish the newly arisen dead. Raising, healing, or punishing the dead is, of course, a belief common among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. On the Last Day, the newly purified and arisen dead will be given the gift of eternal life (*anosh*). Also strongly asserted in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is the role on that Last Day of God's agent—the Hebrew and Christian messiah, the Muslim *mahdi*, and the Zoroastrian *Soshyant*—who will “return” to earth to perform God's final work with humankind. Finally, and even more important, is the concept of a single, supreme God, which is fundamental to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Thus, at a minimum, we can say that Zoroastrianism prepared Iran for the advent of Islam.

The land of today's Iran is different in several respects from the lands of the ancient inhabitants. The peoples we know as the Persians called their land Parsa, but Parsa was just a small part of the country that was known in history as Persia. Persia was officially renamed Iran in 1935, and after the 1979 revolution it became known as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Today's Iran is about the size of a combination of the American states Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas, or the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, and Denmark.

The modern state of Iran is situated in an extraordinarily complicated neighborhood, sharing about 4,400 kilometers (approximately 2,734 miles) of frontiers with Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and a long coast fronting the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. At various periods in its history, it was far larger, comprising much of what we now call the Middle East (i.e., additional territories in what today is divided among Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq to the west and south, and Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to the east). (See map.)

Most of modern Iran is made up of a high desert with less than the eight inches of rainfall needed to sustain agriculture. In the mountains, the Zagros on the western frontier and the Elbruz in the north, rainfall is heavier than

on the plains, but it falls mainly during the winter months when it is less beneficial to agriculture. Consequently, agriculture has been largely concentrated in oases or in their extensions through irrigation. Long before pipes and pumps were available, the early Persians invented a remarkable system of underground canals, known as *ghanats*, that took water long distances from sources to where crops could be grown. Some of these channels required the digging of vertical shafts as much as a hundred meters (328 feet) to excavate the earth and keep the water flowing. Where agriculture could not be practiced, the population existed by nomadism based on herding animals, often trekking hundreds of miles over great mountain barriers from the lowland pastures in the winter to upland meadows in the summer.<sup>3</sup>

The eastern expanses of Iran are composed of a mainly salt desert about a thousand meters (over 3,200 feet) above sea level with virtually no rainfall; in contrast, one-sixth of Iran is about twice as high with often heavy rainfall. Temperatures vary greatly from the northern highlands' mean monthly average of  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $20^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $14^{\circ}\text{F}$  to  $68^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) along the Persian Gulf. The summer temperature on the coastal lands of the Gulf sometimes reaches  $53^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $127.5^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) with high humidity, whereas the lush, tropical coastal strip along the Caspian Sea in the north is adjacent to Iran's ski resorts. So there are extreme contrasts from high to low, cold to hot, wet to dry, and lush to barren.

A notable feature of Iran today is that in 1909 an oil field was brought into production near the Persian Gulf. Large gas reserves were subsequently found and developed nearby. Plentiful and usually cheap Iranian energy has played a major role in the industrialization of the European developed world ever since and today turns the wheels of Asia. Currently, Iran produces about 8 percent of the world's energy supply. The way these resources were developed, as we shall see, was often skewed to fit the world market rather than the needs of the country and often was a cause of disruption and discontent rather than support and security for Iran.

The land that the ancient Persians thought of as their *original* homeland is also different from modern Iran. Their ancestors thought they had "originated" in an area situated in what is now northern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, which they called *Aryana Vaejah* (the homeland of the Aryans). When they were driven out or launched themselves from that area sometime around 800 BC, the Indo-European peoples who would become

Persian moved south of the Caspian Sea along the Elbruz mountain chain. As they reached the northern part of what is today Iraq, they ran into one of the most powerful empires ever known, Assyria. The Assyrians stopped them in their tracks, massacring some and enslaving others. Pushed back toward the east, one group of them, known as the Mada or Medes, settled in what is now northern Iran, where they became agriculturalists and formed a number of small village “kingdoms.” Then sometime in the seventh century BC, most of these separate kingdoms merged into a more or less unified state.

Other tribes of Indo-Europeans slowly made their way south to the hinterland of the Persian Gulf, where both they and their area were known to the ancient Greeks as *Persis* and to themselves as *Parsa*. It is from *Parsa* that the word *Persia* is derived. What little we know of them comes mainly from the observations of the man Cicero called “the Father of History,” the great Greek traveler, gossip, and observer Herodotus. Herodotus was not a casual observer. Curious he was, but his curiosity had a practical, even hard, edge. The Medes and the Persians had merged into Iran’s first empire in around 553 BC. It was expanding and already ruled Herodotus’s home city. It seemed poised to take over the whole Western world, which in his time was made up of scores of small Greek-speaking *poleis* (city-states). He wanted to understand how the Persian Empire arose, how it was organized, who lived in it, how strong it was, and what its intentions were. It is this search for information that drove him to write what today we could think of as a “national intelligence survey” of the kind produced by the Central Intelligence Agency. That is what makes his quest seem so “modern” and so relevant to us today. But there was much more in Herodotus than just observations on the Persians. His was an open and hungry mind, and he sought a deeper understanding of all the peoples of the “East” who made up the then vast Persian Empire. Although he was culturally Greek, Herodotus was a Persian subject. Born about 485 BC on the west coast of Asia Minor in the little Greek city-state of Halicarnassus (now the Turkish city of Bodrum), he was uniquely qualified to try to understand both political systems. He listened to the Persians as carefully as he listened to his own people and meticulously reported even what must have affronted his Greek pride.

Remarkably, Herodotus details the Greek violations of what were then regarded as sacred preserves of diplomatic usage. They included a contemporary parallel to the Iranian seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and the imprisonment of the American diplomats. In

Herodotus' time, when Persian envoys were sent to Sparta and Athens to negotiate a ceasefire, the Spartans and Athenians threw them "into a pit like criminals." To try to make amends, the Spartans sent two volunteers to the Persian Shah to atone with their lives for what Sparta had done. Xerxes, says Herodotus, "with truly noble generosity replied that he would not behave like the Spartans, who by murdering the ambassadors of a foreign power had broken the law which all the world holds sacred."

Much of what Herodotus wrote, like much that is written on Iran today, was based on hearsay, and some of it was wrong. For his mistakes, he apologized in advance, writing, "My business is to record what people say, but I am by no means bound to believe it." So generations of scholars have dissected his work, correcting, reinterpreting, and augmenting it, as no doubt future scholars will do to the flood of works on contemporary Iran by modern observers. Herodotus traveled widely and talked to an astonishing range of both Greeks and Persians; he was a humane, observant, and open-minded student of the way people of his time—not only the Persians but also his own people, the Greeks—lived and thought. It is the search for a similar understanding of the issues and peoples of our times that motivated me to write this book.

Shortly before Herodotus' time, in the middle of the sixth century BC, a man of the Parsa peoples of the south, Cyrus, who was a vassal of the Median ruler of the north, had achieved dominance over the Medes in what was apparently a sort of coup d'état. Merging the Medes and the Parsa, he laid the basis for the superpower of his time, the Achaemenid Empire. It was the first great Iranian empire.

Surprisingly, we know little of Cyrus, although he became the archetype of the Persian ruler and perhaps the most famous man in Persian history. He conquered most of western Asia, but, judged by the standards of his time, he was both humane and tolerant. Unlike earlier and later rulers, both Eastern and Western, he did not massacre the people he conquered and did not try to suppress local cults. While in Babylon, he gave the resident Jews, whom the Assyrians had exiled to the "Babylonian Captivity," permission to return to Jerusalem and restored to them the temple utensils that Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated. In appreciation, the Jews referred to him as "the anointed of the Lord," and Isaiah said of him, "He is my shepherd." Jews even used the word *messiah* for him. To his own people, not only the Parsa but also the Medes, he was a father figure. The Greeks also sang his praises. The Greek



mercenary soldier and historian Xenophon thought of him as the ideal of monarchy, and Alexander the Great is said to have tried to model his imperial persona on Cyrus.

Cyrus had great virtues, but his faults too were monumental. He was vain, headstrong, and avaricious. He often chose war rather than diplomacy to gain his objectives, and when he warred, he did so in a remarkably sophisticated fashion. In fact, some of the innovations of Cyrus and his immediate successors were not duplicated by other countries' armies for centuries.

Sophisticated propaganda was another hallmark of the Persian regime. When three Greek spies were caught snooping on the Persian army, the Persian military commanders condemned them to death, but the Persian king, Cyrus' successor Xerxes, had them brought to him and escorted around his encampment

to see the whole army, infantry and cavalry, and then, when they were satisfied that they had seen everything, let them go . . . pointing out [to his military commanders] that, if the spies had been executed, the Greeks would not have been able to learn in good time how incalculably great the Persian strength was—and the killing of three men would not have done the enemy much harm; but if, on the other hand, the spies returned home, he was confident that their report on the magnitude of the Persian power would induce the Greeks to surrender their liberty before the actual invasion took place, so that there would be no need to go to the trouble of fighting a war at all.

As Herodotus tells us, the empire established by Cyrus and enlarged by his followers stretched eastward from the Mediterranean (i.e., from western Anatolia, some of the Greek islands, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Egypt) right across the Middle East to the lands north of modern Afghanistan and down into modern Pakistan. The problem for the Persians, as for all ancient peoples, was to hold together such a vast space with primitive means of transport and communication. The Persian answer was a road system that would be unmatched until the time of the Roman Empire centuries later. As Herodotus recounts, on the "Royal Road" from the main city in western Anatolia, Sardis (near modern Izmir), to the capital Susa in western Iran, a distance of about 2,500 kilometers (1,600 miles), travelers were served by some 111 "recognized stations, with excellent inns, and the road itself is safe to travel. . . [A]

man will take just ninety days to make the journey.” But urgent messages could be sent by relays of post riders in just nine days. “There is nothing in the world which travels faster than these Persian couriers,” Herodotus wrote.

Although an intelligent and open-minded man, Cyrus, like some modern rulers, failed to appreciate the fundamental fact of political life. Herodotus clearly identified it: “Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best; and that being so, it is unlikely that anyone but a madman would mock at such things. There is abundant evidence that this is the universal feeling about the ancient customs of one’s country.” People everywhere resist when they are invaded by foreigners, even if they come with benign intent.

As we too have painfully learned, even with overwhelming force, war is always uncertain. Cyrus’ insatiable quest for glory and his belief that he was God’s instrument for imposing order on the fragmented and dangerous world were to lead to his destruction at the hands of the greatest unknown woman ruler of all time, the queen of the Scyth peoples, Tomyris.

Queen Tomyris confronted Cyrus at the end of his triumphal march through western Asia. The queen sent a message saying, “Glutton as you are for blood . . . get out of my country with your forces intact. . . . If you refuse, I swear by the sun our master to give you more blood than you can drink, for all your gluttony.” Indeed she did. When Cyrus was killed in the ensuing battle, one of Tomyris’ soldiers cut off his head and delivered it to the queen. His fate fitted her warning. As Herodotus tells us, Tomyris “pushed his head into a skin which she had filled with human blood.”

Cyrus’ bloody end did not, of course, stop the military machine he had created, nor did it daunt his successors. Once created, military machines are hard to stop, and those who stand at their head are pushed as often as they lead. The great wars lay ahead. Huge as it was, the superpower of its age, the Persian Empire impacted on events far beyond its frontiers, even in peace. This process worked both by expulsion—some of its subject peoples migrated and formed new cities in what is today Italy—and by attraction. Its enormous army incorporated detachments from virtually all the peoples of North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Its “security policy” caused it to transfer whole populations from their ancestral areas to distant places and thus mingle languages and peoples. In its quest for power, Cyrus’ dynasty reformed virtually the whole of the Middle East. It was a policy some modern rulers would like to follow.

Coming against Persian power, the Greeks developed for the first time, temporary and incomplete as it proved to be, a contemporary sense of Greek nationhood and the more enduring idea of Hellenic civilization and liberty against “Oriental” barbarism and tyranny. Indeed, our concept of “East versus West”—or, as it has been called, “the clash of civilizations”—arises from Greek opposition to Persia. As we listen to Greek propaganda, we envisage just this theme—which is strikingly apposite today—but it is largely a myth. In their own time, the Greeks deeply admired the Persians. The “nation” for each person was his own city-state, his *polis*—the Greek word from which the English word *politics* derives. Greece was bitterly divided into hundreds of these little societies. Many people—even kings who were driven in exile from their city-states, as was one Spartan king—went to live at the Persian court. When Cyrus’ successors invaded Greece, many, indeed probably most, of the Greek city-states sided with the Persians. Even the Delphic Oracle famously advised the Greeks to make offerings of earth and water, which symbolized Persian hegemony.

Why did the Persians invade Greece? After all, there was little in Greece that would have enriched Persia and much that would have drained its resources. At the time, many of the Greek city-states were hovering on the brink of famine. The answer, I believe, must be the same that drove Cyrus to his death in Central Asia—vanity and avariciousness. But perhaps there is a lesson in the event that even we could heed. Arguably, Cyrus’ successor Darius can be regarded as the first of the neoconservatives: He was convinced that he had a mission, even a divine mission, and that, by defeating Greece, he could restructure the world because, he believed, all the lands of the Mediterranean would follow Greece into the Iranian world empire. Moreover, the Persians deprecated the Greeks, whom they regarded as a little people for their violence, intolerance, and division. After a show of force, they would surely see the light and welcome the Persians with open arms, even with flowers in their hands. This would happen, the Persians were sure, because the Greeks needed the Persians. Left to themselves, the Greeks would destroy one another. They were too uncivilized to live in an ordered world—as they showed when the Spartans and Athenians violated the sacred rules of diplomacy. They were just an unruly nation of shopkeepers, petty people mired in materialism, with no lofty aspiration or saving grace. Shortly after the disastrous Peloponnesian War, when they nearly destroyed one another, the Greek states were appealing to the Persian Empire for protection from one another

and willingly surrendered to the Persians that liberty that they have told us was the essence of their legacy.

One effect of the long series of conflicts in Greece was that the balance of power among the Greek states, unstable as it always was, completely shattered. This opened an opportunity for the near-barbarian state on the edges of the Greek world, Macedonia. There, for years, an ambitious and shrewd ruler had been preparing a powerful army. As would later be said of Prussia, Macedonia had made warfare into the state industry. So when King Philip died in 336 BC, his son, Alexander, inherited a military force that no Greek city could counter. Alexander's Macedonia had been a Persian ally during the great invasions, and when they withdrew he quickly subdued the Greek states. But for him they were merely stepping-stones; the Persian Empire was the great prize. Three years after becoming king of Macedonia, he attacked Persia.

In a series of battles, Alexander crashed through the Persian Empire: From Egypt, through Syria to Iraq, on to Central Asia and Afghanistan, and down to India, he chased the Persian ruler and destroyed his armies. As he moved east, he killed off the royal family, disrupted the bureaucracy, and suppressed the "church" that had held the Persian Empire together, razing Zoroastrian temples, massacring the Zoroastrian priests, the *magi*, and trashing their holy books. We have no record of the Persian reaction to the invasion, yet as one of the foremost scholars of the period has written,<sup>4</sup> we can

guess at the bewilderment and profound distress that the rout of the Persian army, the fall of the royal house, and the emergence of the Greeks as masters must have caused in the heartland of Iran. A faint echo of the people's dismay and the priests' outrage is found in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature, which remembers the "accursed" (*gijastag*) Alexander as the destroyer of fire-temples, the burner of the holy scriptures, and the murderer of the magi; the early Sasanian propaganda portrayed him as the annihilator of Iran's unity and power. . . .

Alexander was oblivious to the Persian attitude toward him, unsatisfied with his victories, and thoughtless about the damage and pain he was causing. Paradoxically, in the course of his attack, or perhaps in part from what he knew of Persia before his invasion, he developed a sort of love affair with the

Persian culture, people, and what he clearly saw as its world image. As he moved eastward toward India, he tasted the delights of a culture far richer than that of primitive Macedonia, and he began to copy Persian dress, court ritual, and etiquette. After a brief incursion into India, where his exhausted army revolted, he began his return toward the west. When, after what must have been a soul-searing march (to which, from knowing the area, I personally can attest) through the scorching and nearly waterless deserts of southern Iran, he reached Susa, the then capital, he decided on one of the most dramatic and bizarre exhibitions ever enacted: Dressed as a Persian, he performed the Persian marriage ceremony, taking Roshanak, the daughter of the defeated Persian emperor, as his wife and marrying out to 80 of his senior officers captive young women of the noblest Persian families. Then to cap the occasion, he arranged that ten thousand of his soldiers marry their mainly Persian camp followers: East was to meet West on the bridal bed. Alexander then enrolled into what had been the Macedonian army some thirty thousand Persian youths, dressed in the Persian army battle uniform. All this, said Arrian, a Greco-Roman historian and military commander, “was a cause of deep resentment to the Macedonians, who could not but feel that Alexander’s whole outlook was becoming tainted with orientalism, and that he no longer cared a rap for his own people or his own native ways.” Indeed, we now know that Alexander planned to go still further: His dream was that the Persian capital, Susa, would become the capital of the world and that from the ruins of the Persian Empire, stiffened by Macedonian troops, would emerge a new world state. Alexander proclaimed his wish in the form of a prayer, “that Persians and Macedonians might rule together in harmony as an imperial power.”

For Alexander, the prayer was not answered. He died in 323 BC in Babylon. His generals then fought over his legacy; his dream of a world empire split into warring states. What had been the eastern part of the Persian Empire was seized by his general Seleucus, who solidified his claim to empire by capturing the old capital of Babylon in 312 BC and building a new capital near Ctesiphon on the Tigris River. He and his half-Persian son and their successors were able to keep at least a part of their empire for nearly three centuries.

*N*ot only in the east but also in the central Persian world, during the centuries after Alexander’s death, there was a sort of replay of early Indo-European history: A new group of Central Asian “Persian” or at least

Indo-European nomads swept into the northeastern part of what had been Cyrus', Alexander's, and Seleucus' empire. In fact, throughout the centuries since Cyrus, nomads in small groups and even whole tribes were periodically arriving in Iran. We do not know the individual tribal names; most are referred to as *Scyths* or *Sakas*, words that probably simply meant "nomads." Already at the battle of Marathon, some of these peoples served in the invading Persian army. There must have been dozens of others in the following years. But in the third century BC, a group large enough and significant enough to be remembered began to arrive from Central Asia. Known as the *Parmi*, they were or became Persian-speaking and founded the second great Persian empire, the Parthian.

At first, the Parthians, like the other nomadic invaders, served the ruling power in Iran as governors of one of the eastern Iranian *satraps* (provinces), but they soon aspired to take Persia for themselves. Around 230 BC, their then chief declared his independence from the Seleucid Empire and made himself king of the Parthians as Arsaces I. Emphasizing a return to the Zoroastrian religion, whose priests, the *magis*, had come to be regarded as the guardians of Persian culture during the "foreign" domination, the Parthians restored the symbols of "Persia," its original alphabet and calendar, and brought to the fore what Iran had never before had, a sort of national church, *Mazdaism*, based on the teachings of Zoroaster. Thus, Arsaces and his successors gradually unified the Persians enough to drive the Seleucids out of Iran. In 141 BC, they completed the task when they captured Babylon.

Having reclaimed "Iran," they found themselves almost too successful. Although they won all the major battles, they needed help to win the peace. So like Asian and African colonies in our own times, they turned to their former European overlords for help, in this case, the Greeks. Strikingly, their leader did something difficult to imagine a nationalist leader in Asia or Africa doing in our times: The Parthian conqueror of Babylon took as his reign title "Lover of the Greeks" (*Philhellene*). He then set about promoting a new form of the melding of Persian and Greek culture: The religion was Zoroastrian, the language both Greek and Persian, the national myth drawn less from Cyrus than from Alexander,<sup>5</sup> but the military power remained Central Asian. Initially, at least, this coalition of ideas and practices was overwhelmingly powerful. But the Parthians soon ran into an opponent against which, over the longer term, no contemporary could resist—Rome.

Rome was drawn into Iran as it was drawn into Spain, Gaul, Switzerland, Germany, and England: because of the ambitions of its rulers. The first to move was Pompey, who from 69 to 63 BC threatened the Parthian state. Pompey did not get very far because he was too involved in Rome's other wars. However, a decade later, the Roman general Crassus followed up Pompey's earlier foray. Apparently, he believed, as have some later commanders, that the Persians would greet him with flowers. But he was prepared to ensure that they would do so not merely from love, but also from fear. So he led into Iran what he thought was an overwhelming force of about thirty-six thousand troops; for the times, the invading army was indeed a massive armada. Some twenty-eight thousand of these men were the elite of the Roman military establishment, its disciplined legionnaires. Another ten thousand were battle-trained Gaulish veterans of the wars in areas that became France, Switzerland, and Germany, lent to the coalition by Julius Caesar. The Romans and Gauls outnumbered the Persian force by nearly four to one. But the Persian force was made up of cavalry. About a thousand of them, the *cataphracti*, resembled medieval Western knights encased in heavy armor; riding not the small ponies of the nomads but huge destriers, they were the Persian shock troops. Another seven thousand or so were light cavalry armed with the Central Asian compound bow. The Persians ensured a supply of missiles by following their forces with a train of camels bearing vast numbers of arrows. The ensuing encounter—Roman infantry against Persian cavalry—was not so much a battle as a massacre: The Persian horsemen circled out of range of the Roman infantry's swords and javelins and deluged them with arrows. The result was that nearly twenty-eight thousand Romans were killed and ten thousand marched off as prisoners. The battle of Carrhae in 53 BC was the greatest military disaster the Roman Republic ever suffered. The Parthian Empire had established itself as the other power in a bipolar world.

When he was assassinated, Julius Caesar was readying his armies to attack Iran; then, fearing Antony's vengeance for Caesar's death, Brutus and Cassius turned to the Iranians to save themselves. The Iranians could not save them but took the opportunity to invade the Roman Levant, where they allied themselves with the Jews. It was to divide them that Antony made Herod the king of Judea. In an interlude of his affair with Cleopatra in Egypt, Antony went on to attack Iran, and under him Rome lost another army to the dashing Iranian horse-borne bowmen.

The Roman-Parthian war was one in which both sides lost. The Romans were quicker to recover, given their vast resources, population policy, and aggressive leadership. Determined to make up for their humiliating defeats, time after time they invaded Parthian territory. Nero stopped his indulgences long enough in AD 59 to order an invasion, Trajan followed a generation later in AD 86, Verus attacked Iran in AD 164, and Septimus Severus led his armies in a devastating raid in AD 198. The Romans not only intermittently harassed the frontiers but even destroyed the Parthian capital at Ctesiphon on the Tigris. Because they had no means to duplicate the Roman ability to convert aliens into members of their society, the Parthians were always outnumbered by the Romans. Worse, over the succeeding generations, members of the Parthian royal family fell out among themselves time after time. As they proved unable to prevent Roman raids, their subjects judged that they had lost their right to rule.

Worse than these military engagements was the first of the great epidemics that were to change the course of history: Smallpox appeared among the people of the Persian-Indian Kushan kingdom in what is now Pakistan and southern Afghanistan and spread to the West. Because no one had immunity against it, the onslaught of the disease was lethal: In some areas, one in four people perished. A sort of peace of the graveyard descended on both the Parthians and the Romans. As one modern historian has written, “this disaster was the greatest single cause of the decline of Roman civilization.”<sup>6</sup> The effects on the Parthians are undocumented, but they must have been similar to those on Rome: disastrous.

So it was that around AD 224, the governor of the central province of Pars broke away to establish a new order that became the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian was to be the third of the great Persian empires. Its task, it must have seemed to its rulers, was to restore the concept of Iran. Central to this task was the role of religion. So it is to the Sasanian period that the codification of Zoroastrianism into the state religion and the state “church” of Mazdaism can be attributed.

The great figure of this movement was the Zoroastrian religious leader Kartir, known in Persian as the *magupat*, or chief of the *Magi*. Kartir was honored as an *ehrpāt*—“a master of knowledge”—a Zoroastrian title comparable to the modern Shia Muslim title *Ayatollah*. Indeed, remarkably re-



sembling Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in his stature and policies, Kartir set out to purge and unify Iran, employing all the coercive power of the state to do so. Although the record is far from complete, it appears that Kartir was able to organize the *magi* or *mobads* (roughly equivalent to the later Muslim *mullas*) into a hierarchy at the head of which he became the high “priest” (*mobadan mobad*) with wide powers to control public education and the administration of law. Unlike Khomeini in our time, however, he did not seek to supplant the state but rather to guide its actions. Although Kartir did not set out a program, it is clear that what he attempted was to embody in the “church” the essence of the Persian traditional way of thought and custom. He used his position to purge or at least contain a variety of movements, including Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, that were then active in Iran. He attacked them all, but came down the hardest on the heresy begun within Zoroastrianism and led by a rival prophet, Mani.

Not only in religious matters but generally, at least in the urban society, Iran was strikingly cosmopolitan. Unlike Byzantium, which could draw little cultural inspiration from the primitive tribal peoples of the Balkans and western Europe, who were falling into “the Dark Age,” the Sasanians enjoyed the already sophisticated culture and literature of their Indian “cousins.” From Parthian times, they had also been in touch with the rich and vibrant society of Han China. Relations with Byzantium, although occasionally hostile, were normally relaxed and open. People and goods traveled relatively freely, and ambassadors and trade missions were regularly exchanged.

Even more striking, there was a fairly steady and often quite sizable movement of peoples. In addition to the forcible transfer of peoples from the frontier provinces, there was then, as ever since, casual movement across the shifting frontiers by nomads and semi-nomads. When opportunities closed in one state, as they did, for example, when Byzantium monopolized the silk industry, workers sought them in the other, as the silk workers did in Iran. Scholars moved as well. When the Byzantine emperor Justinian closed the Platonic Academy in Athens, its dismissed philosophers were welcomed in Iran. These philosophers were non-Christians, but Iran was also hospitable to Nestorian Christians, who were discriminated against in Constantinople. As we shall see, this is a recurrent theme in history—the seeking of sanctuary and the quest for education, in our times, have brought tens of thousands of Iraqis into Iran. Most of the current leaders of Iran have spent years studying in the seminaries there, and under the

tyranny of Saddam Hussein, a large part of the Shia Muslim population of Iraq's south fled or was driven there.

Ideas traveled even faster and more easily: The Sasanians were avid consumers of foreign literature. Khusrau I (AD 531–579) became a great patron of translation not only from Greek but also from Sanskrit. His efforts were culturally enriching, but in the eyes of later Persians, the most interesting cultural contribution of the Sasanians was that they gathered the myths and legends that had grown up all over Iran and brought them together in a collection known as *Khwaday-namag*, which formed the basis for what is recognized as the national epic of the Iranian people, the poet Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The influence of that great epic, comparable to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the Indian *Mahabharata*, would come later. At the time, the Sasanians—even without a Herodotus to guide them—studied the way the Byzantine state worked, minutely examined the elaborate ceremony of the court, where protocol became the essence of politics, borrowed Byzantine military technology, and even, when possible, coopted Byzantine personnel.

Meanwhile, the Iranian rulers were grappling with more obvious military challenges. Their response varied over the years and generations. When Iran was strong, it attempted to expand. The Sasanians became serious and dedicated practitioners of warfare and even captured the Roman Emperor Valerian in battle in AD 259. But when weak, they would retreat into Iran's central core. Over the centuries, Iran's military history can be described in these terms: advance, retreat, regroup, and advance again. But in the Sasanian era, the Iranians increasingly found themselves faced with war on two fronts: On the western frontier, Rome, as the Parthians had known it, had become Byzantium and was often in alliance with Armenia against Iran, whereas on the eastern frontier, a newly arrived and aggressive people, the Hephthalites (White Huns), were making inroads, and tribes of Turks were also beginning the incursions that they would carry forward for the next thousand years.

To counter these threats to the stability of the then bipolar world, the Sasanian ruler Khusrau II tried a novel approach. Instead of attempting to destroy Byzantium, which had proved as impossible as it had been for the Romans/Byzantines to destroy Iran—the Roman writer from Syria, Herodian, famously remarked that the Roman infantry and the Persian cavalry were both invincible—Khusrau decided that they should jointly undertake to bring order

into the world. In this move, Khusrau was proclaiming the Zoroastrian ideal—to heal the suffering of humankind. It was a dramatic, indeed an unprecedented, venture and was broached in a novel form: Khusrau wrote a remarkable letter to “my brother,” the Byzantine emperor Maurice, arguing that the two powers had not profited from “Hot War” or from their version of Cold War. Rather, each had served its own interests best when it acted to control the “restless and warlike nations.” In Zoroastrian terms, these “rogue states” were the agents of Ahriman, the Devil, who brought disorder and evil (*drug*). The *drugvant*, the human wicked, were more or less those we today would think of as terrorists. The role of a wise ruler was to create conditions in which “the lives of men are ordered and ruled.” That should become the policy of both states, Khusrau wrote. They should give up destroying one another’s frontier cities and abandon attempts at “regime change.” He lectured the Byzantine ambassador: “It is impossible for a single empire to take upon itself the innumerable concerns for the order of the world and to succeed in ruling all the peoples upon whom the sun looks down with the single oar of its wisdom.”<sup>7</sup> Alas, this wise move toward a peaceful and respectful world was dashed when the Byzantine emperor was murdered.

Iran also faced another group of nomads, Arabs, on its southwestern frontier. In the sixth and early seventh centuries, they did not appear to be a regime-threatening foe but already were causing considerable damage in the rich agricultural lands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. So the Iranians hit on the solution adopted by the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Chinese Han dynasty: use barbarians to control barbarians. As practiced by Iran, this policy was accomplished by creating and subsidizing a subordinate Arab city-state at Hirah on the desert frontier. Hirah was to act as a buffer, and its rulers were to use their kinship ties, expertise, and Iranian money to divert or suborn the wild tribesmen. Although not a perfect solution to the “Arab problem,” it worked satisfactorily until, partly as a measure of economy, Hirah’s quasi-autonomy was quashed and its rulers were replaced by a Persian governor. The true cost of this economy measure would become evident in the great Arab-Muslim invasion of 651.

For a while, the Sasanian Empire brought together diverse cultural elements that were enjoyed by a rich and refined society in security and peace. So astonishing was this feat to later generations living in a world of danger and turmoil that they looked back upon the Sasanian Empire as a sort of Persian Camelot, a golden epoch when the world was at peace and humans were

happy. Alas, it did not last long. The Byzantines and the Sasanians fought one another to mutual exhaustion in the early seventh century. By then, both Byzantium and Sasanian Iran were bankrupt and without ideas on how to end their wasting conflict. The end was in sight.

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, many of the previously pagan tribes of Arabia ended their allegiance to Islam. In their eyes, they had submitted to Muhammad personally and had no binding ties to whatever tribe, confederation, state, or religious fraternity had come into existence in Madinah. As the Arabic words precisely differentiate and as the Quran specifies, the bedouin tribes had *salamat* (submitted), becoming *Muslims* (“those who submit”) rather than *amanu*, becoming *mu’minuna* (“believers”). So, as the Arabic phrase has it, when Muhammad died, they “turned back on their heels,” *irtaddu ‘ala ‘aqibihim*. That is, as later theologians would put it, they apostated. Across Arabia’s vast steppe and desert, Muhammad’s “empire” vanished like a mirage. To bring the tribes back into the fold, the new Islamic state began the “war of the *ridda*,” against the “going back” to paganism. That war was the most vicious ever experienced in Arabia, but Muhammad’s immediate successors quickly realized that to succeed they must use a carrot as well as a stick. The carrot was a raid, already suggested by Muhammad, into Byzantine territory in what is now Jordan and Syria. The raid was successful. Seeing the Muslims return loaded with booty, the chastened “apostates” flocked to join what they thought would be profitable and exciting raiding parties. Thus was formed a supra-tribal or at least multitribal army.

In 633, this new force, under a brilliant practitioner of desert warfare, the leader of the war of the *ridda* Khalid ibn al-Walid, feinted an attack on the Iranian capital, then at Ctesiphon on the Tigris River near the modern city of Baghdad. Then he led his nomadic warriors across the Great Syrian Desert, where he surprised the Byzantine garrison and seized Damascus. In 636, Khalid’s forces, by then multiplied by new war parties of tribesmen hungry for loot and glory, destroyed a Byzantine army at the battle of Yarmuk. Thus, what had started as a punitive expedition became a raid, and the raid became a war of conquest. In 635, after a desperate battle in which one in three of the Arabs was said to have been killed, Arab tribesmen defeated the Sasanian regular army near the later city of Kufa in what is today Iraq.

Following the initial shock of the invasion, the Arab conquest of Iran took seven years. The Sasanian shah rallied support from all over Iran, but piece by piece, town by town, he was defeated. As Zoroastrians would have explained, he had lost what they called *xvarenah*, which comes close to the Chinese “Mandate of Heaven.” Having lost *xvarenah*, Yazdgard was doomed. But in his struggle against fate, he even sought assistance from the T’ang dynasty in faraway China. As Yazdgard retreated toward the east, Arab armies chased after him, ultimately right up to the Chinese frontier.

Historians have long puzzled over the stunning collapse of this mighty empire under the attack of a previously disorganized and mutually hostile collection of nomadic tribes. Seeking understanding, we should start, where this book does, with the fact that Iran was always susceptible to nomadic invasion; indeed, as we have seen, Iran was the creation of nomadic invasions. But there are other important causes. The Sasanian regime was exhausted and bankrupt; its Zoroastrian “clergy” was blamed for some of its ills, particularly by the large numbers of Persians who in the previous century had converted to Christianity; and the governing elite appear to have been disaffected.

The Arabs, however, were apprehensive. They were adrift in an enormous country whose language and geography they did not know, whose people had a strong sense of identity and were known to be valiant fighters. Some parts of it were not “pacified” for years; indeed, the northern province along the Caspian, the original territory of the Medes, held out for nearly 70 years. The new Arab/Muslim regime, the caliphate, was militarily successful but had no illusions about its still tribal army. Having recently survived the war of the *rida*, Muhammad’s inner group was determined not to allow their vacillating followers to scatter among the Iranian population. They wanted them to keep together to be ready for action, so they created garrison towns, Basra, Kufa, Qom, and other places, where they settled their tribesmen. This is, of course, the pattern followed by invaders throughout history—to create safe redoubts from which to sally in case of danger. But in Iran, creation of these garrisons had a second and unintended result. Because they quickly became prosperous towns, they attracted large numbers of Persian merchants, craftsmen, and laborers. This development brought to the fore the issue of how the Arabs should relate to the Persians and, even more important, how the Persians should relate to the Arabs and their religion. The way this dilemma began to be addressed would shape much of Iranian society and political life down to our own times.

Three aspects of this encounter became evident almost immediately: The first arose from the fact that Islam is a monotheistic religion. Because Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism are also monotheistic—and so met the absolute requirement of Islam, which is belief in one god—Islam could accommodate their followers in a status that was already traditional among bedouin tribes as tolerated and protected outsiders, *dhimmi*s. The protected communities did not have to perform either military service or compulsory labor, and the taxes they were required to pay were assessed on them individually by the leaders of their own communities and were only slightly more than the taxes levied on Muslims. Moreover, women, children, religious men, and the crippled were exempt. Provided they did not revolt, members of these “tolerated” religions—the so-called “Peoples of the Book” (i.e., the Bible)—were accorded more freedom to practice their faiths than before. By extension, this tolerance also was accorded to the Zoroastrians of the *Avesta*. Thus, it appears that much of the population passively accepted the victors.

However, the problem became more complex when Persians chose to convert to Islam. The Quran had proclaimed that, although Islam was the same religion as Judaism and Christianity, it was specially aimed at the Arabs in their language, Arabic. So when the Muslims spoke of Islam, they meant the Arab religion. There was no provision for the conversion of non-Arabs. Far from trying to convert them “with the sword,” the Arabs wanted the Persians to follow their own religions but to behave *like* the Arab Muslims—that is, not to violate their version of God’s will, but to do so in their own ways and in their own communities. So it came as something of a shock when, as defeated people commonly do, the Iranians began to convert to the religion of the dominant community. Perhaps the Arabs could have prevented this by some sort of apartheid, but they did not, nor could the Arabs prevent the procreation of children in mixed marriages. So a new sort of Iranian came into being, usually called a *mawla* (Arabic plural: *muwali*). Soon, the *muwali* sought to regularize their status in Islam by proclaiming themselves Muslim but to keep their national identity by becoming Muslim in a particularly Iranian way. This tendency began early and was ultimately to produce the Shia sect of Islam.

The second aspect of the encounter was that there was much in Islam that would have been familiar to Zoroastrians. The most obvious custom was that both faiths required five prayers a day, and a number of beliefs were

shared by both: the dualism of God (Allah, Ahura Mazda) and the Devil (Iblis, Ahriman); the primacy of law to regulate social behavior; and the belief in the Last Day (the Zoroastrian *rasho-keretfi* or *frashgird* and the Quranic *al-Yaumu'l-akhir* or *yaumu'l-qiyamah*) when a messiah, *mahdi* or *Soshyant*, will return to earth and God will resurrect the dead, judge them, give the righteous everlasting life, and condemn the evil to Hell. Both religions assert that God created humankind for a purpose—to pursue the good and struggle against evil—but also that mankind is weak and needs the help of a text (*Avesta*, Quran) and men of religion (*magi* or *mobad*, *mullas* or *mutahids*) to regulate their lives. These similarities eased the path to conversion of Zoroastrians.

The third aspect of the encounter of Arabs and Persians was more contentious: The Persians, even those whose wealth was undiminished by the invasion, were intensely nationalistic, as Persians had been since the time of Cyrus the Great and as Iranians remain down to our times. Like all peoples, as Herodotus long before had pointed out, they resented the intrusion of foreigners into their country. Even when they opposed aspects of the Sasanian regime, most Persians probably felt at least a pride in it. Moreover, from long pre-Islamic contacts, they had come to dislike the Arabs. Some had suffered from bedouin raids, but even of those who had not, many had adopted a racial stereotype of the Arabs as primitive, dangerous, lesser beings. In Persian literature, particularly in the great epic the *Shahnameh*, they are commonly associated with the Devil, Ahriman. As we shall see, these attitudes remained strong for centuries after the invasion and indeed still do. So it came as a shock when these same *untermenschen* became their rulers. In the aftermath of battle, many had seized Persian women, appropriated Persian property, and treated Persians as second class. Persians were not allowed to marry Muslim (i.e., Arab) women, but Arabs could marry Persian women. Persians were forbidden to try to convert Muslims to other religions, to carry weapons, to ride horses, or to build new churches or temples. Resentment may have begun early, but it was some years before grievances burst into revolt. One of the most striking revolts occurred in AD 655 under the fourth caliph, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, Ali. The issue was nonpayment of taxes, and Ali, who was by then the father-in-law of a Persian woman (his son had married a daughter of the family of the last Shah), ordered a savage suppression of the rebels. This is particularly ironic because it is Ali who was to become a virtual saint to Iranian converts to Islam.

After the death of Ali, who was murdered in 661 by an Arab Muslim extremist, the old oligarchs of Mecca took over the leadership of the Islamic caliphate and established themselves as the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus. Two of Ali's grandsons tried to rebel and were killed. That event formed the subject of the great passion play (later known as the *Taziyeh*, which I discuss later) that became one of the defining events of Iranian culture. Inflamed by a sense of injustice, shamed at not having prevented Ali's murder, and hating the regime for a variety of reasons, a covert revolutionary movement began in the far east of Iran. Spread mainly by propaganda, it rapidly gained adherents there and in Central Asia. A secret movement that had to hide to survive, it is still veiled from full analysis. What we now know is that it drew on disaffected Arabs, newly converted Persians, and even Zoroastrians and that it was fired by a mystical belief drawn from both Islam and Zoroastrianism: that the world was nearing the Last Day and that a *mahdi* or *Soshyant* was about to return to judge humankind. This figure was concealed but would be revealed, the leaders of the movement claimed, when the existing regime collapsed.

Nearly as hidden as God's agent was the movement's leader, a man known as Abu Muslim. It is now generally believed that he was a Persian convert to Islam: a *mawla*. Like the growing number of *muwali*, he staked out a political position against the "usurpers," as they and Muhammad's closest associates regarded the Umayyads. As Muslims, they began to explain their beliefs and politics by proclaiming themselves to be *Shiis* (Partisans) of Ali. Although still amorphous, the sect they were beginning to formulate was to incorporate more of the Zoroastrian tradition than would be acceptable or even understandable to the orthodox, or *Sunni*, Arab Muslims. Centuries later, the Shiis would grow into the second-largest division of Islam. Though there are many differences, for convenience we can think of the Shiis and Sunnis as comparable to the Protestants and the Catholics (I have more to say about Sunnis later). At this time, however, the Shiis had not yet formalized their beliefs into a coherent canon; as nearly as we can now see it, what Abu Muslim led was a movement of political and social protest, using as its symbols and ideology the eschatological beliefs of both Islam and Zoroastrianism.

Abu Muslim was a master propagandist, and he addressed a receptive audience. So having proclaimed his mission, known as the *Hashimiyyah*, in AD 747, and donning what would become the distinctive sign of his forces,



a black gown, an echo of which could be seen in the black-clad protesters in the March 2009 riots in Tehran, he quickly gathered together a motley band of peasants, tradesmen, and craftsmen. Misjudging them and the intensity of their *jihād*, the Umayyad governor sent only a small force to crush them. When that counterinsurgency force was defeated, still more partisans joined the revolt. As these insurgents won their first battles, Abu Muslim was able to explain their victories in mystical terms so that new adherents flocked to the movement's black banners, which signaled the imminent arrival on earth of the agent of God, the mahdi. Area by area, Abu Muslim's forces defeated the Umayyads in eastern Iran and then launched attacks on the Umayyad forces in the western parts of Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Little more than a year after the revolt began, the final defeat of the Umayyads came in a battle near Mosul in what is now Iraq.

Then a strange event or series of events happened. Somehow, and it is still far from clear how, the movement was "hijacked" by its titular leaders, the branch of Muhammad's family known as the Abbasids. As soon as they could, just eight years after Abu Muslim gave them the Umayyad empire, the Abbasids executed Abu Muslim. Instead of returning to the pristine purity of early Islam or bringing to some sort of fruition the mystical impulses of the revolution, they created a regime patterned on an entirely different mix of Arab and Persian ideas and practices. From the Arabs, they adopted the language and more or less what had come to be the "orthodox" form of Islam, Sunnism, whereas from Iran, they adopted a traditional model of imperial administration. Despite, or perhaps because of, the revolutionary past, they turned away from the relatively open Arab style of the Umayyads toward the more monarchical court ritual of Cyrus the Great. This was the Abbasid caliphate.

Only a century passed before the Abbasid hold on Iran weakened. One province after another broke away, and one—the area along the Caspian Sea where the Medes had once held sway—gave rise to an Iranian dynasty known as the Buyids, who became in AD 946, effectively if not in name, the real rulers of the Abbasid caliphate and the first Iranian group to reunite Iran since the Arab invasion. Often the plaything of Buyid generals and Turkish mercenaries, the caliphs became largely symbolic figures. But, in name and in symbolism, the Abbasid caliphate was to linger for five hundred years.

The decline of the Abbasid dynasty ushered in a period of chaos and destruction, but paradoxically the period was also one of cultural flowering. The Persian Buyids in the west and another dynasty known as the Samanids in the East laid the foundation by collecting into their libraries the literary survivors of the years since the Arab invasion. Military dictators though they were, the Buyids were both curious and ecumenical. They drew works from all the languages they encountered. Even more creative were the Samanids in what is now Afghanistan. Under their patronage, Iranian authors, particularly poets to whose works Persians have always been addicted, prospered.

During this time, a new medium of expression came into vogue. In the early centuries after the Arab conquest, Iranians had tended to write in Arabic; then sometime around AD 900, a few began to write in the mixture of Arabic and what is known as “middle” Persian or Pahlavi, which would form the new Persian language (Farsi). In this new language, which was and still is written in a modified Arabic script or in Arabic itself, Iranians composed books on Arabic grammar and syntax, wrote the basic and still most influential commentaries on the Quran, and became notable connoisseurs of classical Arabic poetry. One of them, the Iranian Shia scholar Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, edited the most famous collection of works on Arabic culture, *The Book of Songs (Kitab al-Aghani)*. Not content with collecting and editing, Iranians also began to compose notable works on their own. If they were not quite up to Herodotus, the scholars Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari from the far northern province of Iran, Tabaristan, which had been the land of the ancient Medes, and the Neo-Platonist Abu Ali Ibn Miskawaih from the ancient city of Ray near modern Tehran produced two notable histories, *The Chronicles* and *The Experiences of the Nations*. The Persian philosopher Abu Ali Husain Ibn Sina became the guide for generations of medieval Europeans as “Avicenna.” Also from Bukhara came Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi, a scientist, logician, musicologist, and a spur to the European Renaissance.

Above all, it was at this time that the national epic of Iran, the *Shah-nameh*, a vast poem of sixty thousand verses, was partly composed and partly collected over half a lifetime by the great poet Abol Qasem Firdowsi, who was born in the far east of Iran, Khorasan, in AD 935.<sup>8</sup> More famous in the West, Omar Khayyam was born a century later, probably in the then Persian city of Nishapur, and spent most of his life in Samarqand and Bukhara. He

thought of himself as a mathematician and an astronomer, but his lasting fame rests on his *Rubaiyat*.<sup>9</sup>

Collectively, their works would catapult the new Persian into the language of diplomacy, culture, and refinement not only for the next great Persian empire, the Safavid, but also for the Indian Mughal and the Turkish Ottoman Empires and even for the Central Asian Turkish and Mongol kingdoms. Persian was widely used even in faraway T'ang China and was the lingua franca of the "Great Southern" (Indian and Pacific) Ocean.

Language at least was impervious to arrows and spears, but men, libraries, and whole cities were not. So it was that this period of cultural growth was virtually swept away in one of the greatest onslaughts recorded by history—the invasions of the Turks and Mongols.

Far to the east, across Asia in China, a Turkish general overthrew the T'ang dynasty in AD 907 and set in motion the first ripples of what would become the tidal wave that swept across most of the world. When the Chinese regrouped and formed a strong new government, the Song dynasty, they sought to end the "Turkish threat" by closing their frontiers to the Turks. Blocked to the east and attacked by the warlike Mongol Ch'i-tan, the Turks turned west. Their first major incursion was by a group of tribes known for their early leader as Seljuk; the Seljuks conquered eastern Iran in 1040 and plunged into Baghdad 15 years later. In 1071, their then sultan Alp Arslan defeated and captured the emperor of Byzantium and thus upset the balance of power in the Middle East as completely as had the Arabs four hundred years earlier.

Most of the Seljuk actions fall outside of Iran, but there and elsewhere in the Middle East they briefly stimulated a sort of mini-renaissance. The Seljuk prime minister, a Persian by the name of Nizam ul-Mulk, created the most impressive educational systems in the world of his time. He aimed to establish a college of higher learning in every significant city in the Seljuk Empire to train a competent civil service. Events overwhelmed his efforts, but he planted in the minds of successive rulers down to our own times an ideal of government that could be measured by its dedication to education.

Following on the heels of the Seljuks, in 1215, Genghis Khan put together the greatest military force the world had ever experienced. His armies

captured the Chinese capital (later known as Peking or Beijing), and in 1221 they made their first raids into Russia. At the same time, they invaded Iran for the first time. After Genghis Khan's death, Mongol armies conquered Russia, and Genghis Khan's grandson, Hulagu Khan, smashed across Iran in 1258 to capture the still-partly Persian Baghdad, killing perhaps 800,000 people and ending the Abbasid caliphate. At that time, many of the cities of Iran were far larger than Paris, London, or Venice; thus, they had much to lose by the Mongol invasion. Descriptions by eyewitnesses are horrifying. Everywhere they went, the Mongols razed cities, carried away or killed the craftsmen who had enriched them, and destroyed irrigation works so that both cities and the countryside were virtually depopulated. Their policy aimed to convert the agricultural lands to the open pasture the nomads wanted, and they carried it out by genocide. Most of the famous old cities of Iran were virtually annihilated by attack after attack—Herat, for example, was sacked six times between 1270 and 1319—and in the wake of the armies came famine and pestilence. Cities shrank into towns, and towns shrank into villages. Many villages simply disappeared. The well-informed Persian (and probably Jewish) historian Rashid al-Din reported that half of the houses in Iran's cities were abandoned, and "[i]n some areas . . . the native population was either completely annihilated or had fled, leaving their land waste. . . ." Those who survived clung precariously and miserably to niches in the old societies and economies, as we would imagine the survivors of a nuclear war might in our time.

Then, tenaciously, the survivors began to pile bricks on top of one another, plow neglected fields, and fashion the necessities of life. No sooner had they begun to do so than they were struck by the second wave of the tsunami: In the last years of the fourteenth century, another member of the dynasty, Timur (known in the West as Tamerlane), led his armies back and forth across Iran to ravage its cities. When the people of Isfahan defied him, Timur built pyramids of seventy thousand of their skulls. The medieval culture that had slowly, partly, and painfully recovered from the first wave was devastated.<sup>10</sup> Even a century later, Marco Polo and the great Arab traveler, Ibn Battuta, found in Iran just decaying ruins. Those who had survived must have wondered whether survival was worthwhile and whether Iran could possibly recover. It was surely this horrifying experience, repeated as it was over a century and virtually everywhere throughout Iran, that planted in the collective memory of Iranians an abiding fear of foreign invasion. The effects linger to this day.

*In* this attempt to get at what it means to “become Persian,” I have recounted a number of the events and streams of thought—pride and fear, belief and conflict, foreign intervention and domestic reaction, unification and division, and aggression and defeat—that together constitute the country’s “collective unconscious”: the sum of influences that have shaped this people into Iranians.