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a country study

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The winged lion on the cover is part of a glazed brick panel from Susa, on display in the Tehran Archaeological Museum

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Foreword

This volume is one of a continuing series of books written by Foreign Area Studies, The American University, under the Area Handbook Program. Its title, format and substance reflect modifications introduced into the series in 1978. The last page of this book provides a listing of other country studies published. Each book in the series deals with a particular foreign country, describing and analyzing its economic, military, political, and social systems and institutions and examining the interrelationships of those systems and institutions and the ways that they are shaped by cultural factors. Each study is written by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists. The authors seek to provide a basic insight and understanding of the society under observation, striving for a dynamic rather than a static portrayal of it. The study focuses on historical antecedents and on the cultural, political, and socioeconomic characteristics that contribute to cohesion and cleavage within the society. Particular attention is given to the origins and traditions of the people who make up the society, their dominant beliefs and values, their community of interests and the issues on which they are divided, the nature and extent of their involvement with the national institutions, and their attitudes toward each other and toward the social system and political order within which they live.

The contents of the book represent the work of Foreign Area Studies and are not set forth as the official view of the United States government. The authors have sought to adhere to accepted standards of scholarly objectivity. Such corrections, additions, and suggestions for factual or other changes that readers may have will be welcomed for use in future revisions.

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living by publicly explaining points of ritual. Funeral rites are elaborate. Vows of charity and piety are frequently made for the fulfillment of a wish. A person who has asked for the granting of a wish often symbolizes this request by slaughtering a sheep or by attaching a padlock or a shred of cloth to the door or some other part of a shrine, even to holy trees.

There is virtually a cult of Ali in Iran. Many homes have a painting of him set in an enshrined niche, and gold medals with his portrait are worn by many in all classes. In times of trouble Ali, not Allah (God), is exclaimed; and whenever an example is called for, whether in social discourse or business dealings, anecdotes about Ali occur much more often than those of the Prophet. The hadith of Ali are collected in a volume that is regarded with almost the same reverence as the Quran and is probably read more often.

Two religious practices, unique to Shia Iran, combine those elements of cathartic religious tragedy and beauty so beloved by Iranians. The *rawda* (literally, garden) is a series of religious sessions during which the *rawda khwan*, a person gifted in the techniques of sermons and laments who is not necessarily a *mujtahid*, delivers powerfully emotional sermons and recites and sings laments on the subject of the deaths of the Prophet or the Imams. The government sponsors *rawdas* in mosques during Muharram and Safar. In addition they are given in private homes, throughout the year, usually as *nadhr*, the fulfillment of a vow for some special favor asked of God. Anyone may go to a *rawda*. Black flags on the door indicate that a *rawda* will be held. Weather permitting they are held in a garden. Some of the particularly pious attach loudspeakers outside of their houses so that those who cannot fit inside the house may still benefit from the *rawda*.

The holding of a *sufra* is similar but is usually strictly confined to women. *Sufras* are held to fulfill *nadhr*, and a woman will invite her friends to a lavish feast prepared with meticulous and highly ritualistic care. A female *rawda khwan* will recite and chant during the meal. After the performance, the remainder of food is distributed among the poor and the participants and is believed to possess baraka. The success of both the *sufra* and the *rawda* is judged by the number of people who are moved to weeping.

Despite the Islamic prohibition against magic, it is widely practiced in Iran where it is combined with Islamic motifs. The magical use of Quranic phrases is a traditional science, and certain phrases or formulas are well-known for their specific application. *Dua*, short prayers that include the names of Sufi saints or imams, may be carried on the person or inscribed on rings and amulets. The *dua niwis*, the writer of the correct *dua* for a specific situation, and the *rammal*, the practioner of geomancy, enjoy a brisk trade in urban and rural areas.

Iran has major religious holidays throughout the year. New Year, No Ruz, is the continuation of the Zoroastrian New Year and, although the celebration naturally contains many pre-Islamic

elements, it has become strongly Islamicized. The Quran is placed on a table along with young plants and the *haft sin* (seven things that begin with the letter *s*). Blessings are recited for the Prophet and his family, and prayers are offered. Joyous religious festivals are the feasts at the end of Ramazan; the feast of the sacrifice during the hajj month; the birthdays of Muhammad, Ali, and the Imams; and the Idi Ghadir, which commemorates the day when Ali was chosen as successor to the Prophet.

Tragic religious events are more numerous than the joyful: the most important is Ashura, the death of Husyan on the tenth of Muharram. Mourning begins on the eve of his martyrdom, and the procession of self-flagellation occurs on the day itself. There is open weeping and exclamations of sorrow on the streets as the procession passes. *Taaziehs*, highly emotive passion plays, are performed depicting the events of his martyrdom.

The deaths of the Prophet, Ali's other son, Imam Hassan, and of Imam Reza, all occur in Safar. The attack and eventual death of Ali on the twenty-first of Ramazan is understandably a major event. Other mourning holidays are for the deaths of Ali's wife, Fatima, and of the other Imams.

Deviant Religious Movements

After the acceptance of Shiite doctrine as the official religion in the sixteenth century, there were many schismatic movements, partly encouraged by the Shiite principle of *ijtihad* (personal reasoning, derived from the Arabic word meaning *to struggle*). The follower of *ijtihad* is permitted to study rules and regulations and their sources, draw his own conclusions, and follow his conscience on procedural matters without reference to the authorities. This code of personal responsibility is open to anyone who can make an intelligent judgment. The two most important deviant movements that exist in modern times are Sufi mysticism and Bahaism.

In the ninth century, as the conquering Arabs adopted a way of life at variance with the puritanism of the early period of Islam, the Sufi movement was formed by Muslims who felt that worldly pleasures distracted from the true concern of the believer with the salvation of his soul. They also believed that materialism was supporting and perpetuating political tyranny. They prescribed meditation that over the years became formalized. The Sufis believe love of God is the only real condition; all else is illusion, and sense and reason are inadequate to explain these facts. Their name is generally believed to come from the rough white wool (*suf*) that they wore as a symbol of their asceticism; some scholars, however, claim the name came from the Greek word *sophos* (knowledge).

By the tenth or eleventh century the Sufis had developed a semiliturgical poetic service with a significant musical content. Influenced by Christianity and pre-Islamic mystery religions, their mystic love of God sought outlet in religious fervor. Some became so preoccupied with the contemplation of divine perfection that they sought ecstatic trances, eventually by prescribed

phases, as a means of identifying with God. Mystic poetry and music were developed to a high degree as aids in achieving their selfless state. As a result, Sufi poets were among the greatest contributors to Iranian art.

A number of Sufi brotherhoods were established during the early centuries of Islam, many of which continue to exist. In the late 1960s one Kurdish sect had members in nine Middle Eastern countries. One of the brotherhoods, which came into being in the thirteenth century, was that of the whirling dervishes (from the Iranian word meaning *poor*), mendicant ecstatics known for their gyrating dances performed while in a trance, a condition heightened by the gyrations. Dervishes and other Sufi orders maintain loose organizations and hold private meetings at which the traditional ritual chanting of Sufi poetry and invocations are carried on.

A *khaniqah*, the tomb of a dead Sufi master or the teaching center of a living one, continues to be a vital religious institution in contemporary Iran and is actually a complex of centers. It houses rooms for spiritual training as well as accommodations for *fuqara* (disciples) and for visiting Sufis. The ceremonies of the *khaniqah* are opened to the public on such special occasions as birthdays of the Prophet Muhammed and the Imams and on the mourning holidays. In addition to the *fuqara* who reside there and the public who occasionally visit, there are others from all socioeconomic classes who may go once a week to the *khaniqah* for instructions in Sufi spiritual techniques. The meeting of these people on a frequent basis is socially significant because it is one of the few Iranian institutions that cuts across all classes and where there are exchanges among the members of all groups.

The major Sufi orders, most of which have branches in other countries, wield considerable influence in shaping contemporary cultural life, particularly in the fields of philosophy, music, literature, and painting. Because of the Sufi orientation to the esoteric or mystical truths of Islam, Sufism is attractive to those Iranians who, while living in the real world, nevertheless seek spiritual realization. Because the emphasis is on the development of the inner self and because Sufism may be approached and appreciated on any intellectual level, it draws, though not necessarily or exclusively, from groups that are not otherwise religious in the traditional sense of outward practice. In order of their size and influence, the following Sufi orders are most prominent in Iran today; the Nematollahi, which has centers throughout the country; the Gunabadi, chiefly in Khorasan; the Dhahabi in Shiraz; the Qadiri in the Persian Gulf area and in Kordestan; and the Naqshbandi, also in Kordestan.

The Bahai movement had its origin in the eighteenth-century heretical beliefs of the followers of Shaykh Ahmed Ahsai, who taught that the hidden Imam was a creative force with which contact could be made through a human intermediary, the Bab (door). In 1840 Mirza Ali Muhammad of Shiraz proclaimed himself

Dervish carrying flag ornamented with symbol of Shiite resistance
U.S. Army photograph

to be the Bab and gained the following of many tribal leaders. The Babi movement grew rapidly and assumed the character of a militant new faith at considerable variance with Shiism. The Babis interpreted the Quran as largely allegorical and represented the resurrection as a manifestation of divine spirit. Claiming to be Muslim nevertheless, they taught that all religions have elements of truth, peace, brotherhood, and tolerance. The heretics were severely persecuted by the Shiite leaders, and many were put to death, including Ali Muhammad.

A number of the Babis escaped, however, and followed Hussein Ali Baha Ollah, a disciple of Ali Muhammad, who declared himself the expected manifestation of the divine spirit, the messiah of all religions, and the promulgator of a new era. The followers of Baha Ollah, known as the Bahais, were pacifists (unlike the Babis) and preached respect for the law. They advocated universal brotherhood of man and legal equality between men and women. The Bahai movement was spread throughout the world; it has small groups active in Western Europe and the United States and claims a world membership of 500,000. The Bahais have been severely condemned by the Shiite clergy; the Bahai religion, while not under active suppression, is not legally recognized in Iran.

In addition to the Sufis, who may be appreciated as representing the mystical aspect of Islam, and the Bahais, who are now totally outside the theology of Islam, there are several sects active in Iran today that fall somewhere in the middle of these two interpretations. Of these dissident sects, the Ismailis are the oldest and were very numerous in Iran during the medieval period. They were originally part of the larger Shiite movement but split from the main body of Shiites during the ninth century over the question of the rightful successor to the Imamate. They claim only seven imams but have a religious leader, Aga (or Agha) Khan, forty-ninth descendant of their last imam. The largest number of Ismailis are in other countries, but in 1977 several thousand resided in Iran, chiefly in the Elburz Mountains.

Two smaller groups—the Ali Allahi and Ahl i Haqq—are concentrated in Lorestan but have also spread to Mazandaran, Kordestan, and some of the southern provinces. Although still a part of the Islamic tradition, these two sects emerged from politicized Sufi orders, and members of these two religious groups ignore the shariah and many Muslim devotional practices.

Minority Religions

The official recognized minority religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Each of these groups is permitted to sustain an organization, to elect a representative to the Majlis (the lower house of Parliament), to maintain religious schools, and to publish periodicals. They are, however, restricted in their political activities since non-Muslims cannot occupy command positions in the armed forces and cannot achieve policymaking positions in the government.

In mid-1977 there were an estimated 80,000 Jews in Iran, living mainly in Tehran, Isfahan, Kashan, Hamadan, and Shiraz. Since 1948 some 45,000 Jews have migrated to Israel. Iranian Jews form one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world, and through more than 1,000 years of living among the Iranians, have become physically and spiritually very close to the majority population. They have preserved, however, a rather conservative, closed religious life. They are fully protected by the Constitution.

In the twentieth century the Jewish community achieved importance in the commercial life of the major cities, particularly Tehran, and Jews have entered the professions, most notably pharmacy, medicine, and dentistry. They have their own hospitals and academic and technical schools and are the only ethnic group that is considered 100 percent literate. The Jewish shrine to Esther and Mordecai is at Hamadan; the tomb of Daniel is supposed to be located near Ahvaz.

Native Christians are limited almost entirely to the Semitic Assyrians, numbering about 30,000, who live around Lake Rezaiyeh and in Tehran, and to the Armenians, totaling approximately 250,000, living mainly in Tehran and Isfahan. Most Assyrians belong to the Assyrian Church of the East, formerly and mistakenly called the Nestorian Church. As a result of Western missionary work in the twentieth century, four distinct denominations also exist, including Roman Catholic and Protestant groups. Adherents to these four Christian groups were estimated at approximately 30,000 in the mid-1970s. Most Armenians belong to the Gregorian Church under the Catholicos of Cicile at Beirut. This has led to a political split in the Armenian community as many Armenians continue to recognize the leadership of the Catholicos of Echmiadzim at Yerevan in Soviet Armenia, who claims to represent the entire community.

Armenians have long been free to enter the economic and social life of Iran. They have achieved a relatively high standard of living, have maintained a large number of religious schools, and are entitled to two seats in the Majlis. An annual feature of their worship is a pilgrimage to the ruins of the Church of Saint Thaddeus, founded over 1,500 years ago, in the area that became West Azarbaijan. The strong National Armenian Committee represents the interests of the religious community.

The foreign community of business and diplomatic people make up the bulk of the remainder of the Christians. They have churches in major cities, where services are conducted in European languages.

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One of the best treatments of Shiism in Iran is Sayyid Hossein Nasr's article, "Ithna Ashari Shiism and Iranian Islam." Roger Savory's article, "Land of the Lion and the Sun," is useful as an

the economic, military, and political sectors, the elite has been expanded to include high-level government administrators from families with a tradition of service to the throne, general officers of the military and security forces, highly respected professional men, and the wealthiest industrialists and representatives of commercial interests. Although no longer the ruling dynasty and precluded by the Constitution from holding the highest political positions, members of the Qajar family retain important political, economic, and social status. In 1977 the upper class was estimated to comprise less than 1 percent of the total population.

Members of the elite tend to be involved in numerous complex interrelationships. Some members of the Senate, which included many members of the elite, were also on the boards of several industrial and commercial enterprises and were owners of a large number of villages. Since an important prerequisite for entry into the elite has usually been belonging to a "good family," blood and marital relationships tend to bring together important segments of the elite. Until the land reform measures most political leaders were also large landowners, and many of the Islamic leaders held a number of lucrative trusteeships over property endowed for religious purposes, waqf land.

In spite of all the prestige and power the ruling elite did not enjoy real security even before the reform movement. There is no strong group or class cohesion even at the top. The members react individually or by family to the favor or displeasure of the single individual at the apex of the entire social hierarchy, the shah. One of the conclusions of Zonis' study was that because of such factors, the behavior of the political elite emerged from and was based on four attitudinal characteristics: political cynicism, personal mistrust, manifest insecurity, and interpersonal exploitation. Studies by other observers identified the same or similar characteristics in the society as a whole.

The middle class underwent considerable changes during the 1960s and 1970s, the most important of which was its rapid expansion. The class may be divided vertically into upper and lower middle-class strata and horizontally into modern and traditional groups.

The members of the upper middle stratum are drawn from the same occupational sources as the upper class. They are found in lesser positions in the civil service in Tehran or in top positions in provincial cities, in positions just below command level in the military, in important but not outstanding positions in commerce and industry, among professionals who have not achieved recognition as being at the top of their profession, in positions of religious respect, and finally as landowners of local influence but not important enough to be consulted when new policies are being considered for the rural areas. They include latecomers to the cause of the Pahlavi dynasty, younger offshoots of old upper-class families, members of families too actively associated with the

Qajar dynasty but powerful enough to hold on to some of their former glory, those who through choice or fate have not acquired a foreign education or some other essential of upper-class status, and men of unusual ability who could never hope to attain upper-class status for reasons having to do with their ethnic origins or religious adherence. The Bahais are the most conspicuous example in this category.

Because political connections are the key to social status, the upper middle stratum continually hopes that some political change will bring them as individuals into the upper class. The lower middle class is made up of small retailers, craftsmen, low-level government employees, mullahs, and related occupations. Generally they are less well educated and less well paid than members of the upper middle class. Like the upper middle class they have a strong dislike for manual work, preferring desk jobs, especially with the government. The members of this stratum do not, however, have the hope of the upper middle stratum that fate will propel them into the upper class. They are too far away from the dividing line, and they do not have the economic resources, family background, or political connections to take advantage of a shift in the political scene. Their main concern appears to be that they do not lose their social niche and fall into the lower class.

The middle class is also divided into modern and traditional groups. The modern middle class consists of those persons with Western education employed in government services, the professions, and the universities, whereas the traditional middle class includes bazaar merchants, mullahs, and wealthy guild members.

The two groups differ greatly in their origins and outlook. The modern middle class stems from the development of a modern bureaucracy originating in the late nineteenth century. This group was significantly expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, largely as a function of the greater access to education and wealth. James A. Bill notes that, "One of the most profound unintended consequences of the White Revolution is the accelerating growth of the professional middle class." Bill pays special attention to the modern middle class that he calls "The Professional-Bureaucratic Intelligentsia." He views them as an alienated class for the most part and the class that is most vociferous about the need for system transformation. This group, whose power position comes primarily from talents or skills acquired from a modern formal education, increasingly refuses to participate in or is at least intensely frustrated by the personal maneuvering and manipulation that are necessary for advancement in society.

The civil service reforms of 1966 strengthened the position of this group. The reforms introduced competitive examinations and provided that advancement would be based on education and skill rather than on traditional criteria. Once in a position in the civil service, however, individuals have found that traditional methods for retaining a position or securing another position have con-