

Notes on the History of Iran

Compiled by Renee Major from Hamid Dabashi's *Iran: A People Interrupted* (The New Press 2007) and Farhang Rajaee's *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 2007).

Originally posted: <http://www.lsu.edu/srp/facres08.html>

Dabashi writes about the people of Iran: "Iranians are Zoroastrian, Jewish, Catholic, Armenian, Muslim, Sunni, Shi'I, and Bahai, and there are also many blessed atheists among them. Iranians are Arabs, Azaris, Baluchis, Kurds, Persians, Turkmans and (illegal) immigrants to countries all over the globe. Iranians are socialist, nationalist, Islamist, nativist, internationalist, liberal, radical, and conservative, and a few of their top-notch intellectuals have even joined the Oriental regiment of the U.S. neocons – Iranians cannot be cornered – they run away from all their stereotypes as a rabbit flees a fox" (19).

Pre-1925:

1804-1813 First Russo-Persian War

1813-1828 War eventually lost to Russia, with loss of territory.

1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution. Dabashi calls this event the beginning of modern Iran, when the absolute monarchy becomes a constitutional monarchy (71).

1925-1979: Rule of the Pahlavi Royal Family (Reza Shah and son Muhammad Reza Shah)

The rule of the first Pahlavi monarch comes about as a result of a military coup in 1921 supported by the British. Reza Shah crowned himself on April 25, 1926. Reza Shah was determined to modernize Iran, looking to imitate Ataturk's modernization of Turkey (1895-1914, Young Turk Movement).

1934 Establishment of Tehran University, modern and secular.

Dabashi says of the university: "Tehran University would of course also function as the secular counterpart of religious seminaries in Qom and Mashhad – thus there were now two, diametrically opposed, educational systems, one almost exclusively under the control of the Pahlavi government, while the others thrived under a more or less autonomous clerical establishment" (121).

1936 Veiling of women in public is banned by the Shah.

1941 Second Pahlavi monarch, age 22, occupies the throne after his father is exiled to South Africa. Dabashi says of this transition: "The flirtation of Reza Shah with the Axis powers resulted in the Allied occupation of Iran soon after the war began, and he was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, who was installed and supported in power by the Allied forces" (123).

1943 Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin meet in Tehran; they promise Iran national sovereignty (Dabashi 124).

1951 Iranian Prime Minister Mosaddeq nationalizes the Iranian oil industry, which foments a power struggle with the Shah. Dabashi notes that this is a time when anticolonial movements are active in the region, Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Nasser in Egypt (127).

1953 The US CIA engineers a coup (led by Kermit Roosevelt) that removes Prime Minister Mosaddeq, and brings the Shah back to power.

Dabashi notes that Iran served as a crucial logistical base for the American military during the US involvement in the Vietnam War (1956-1975) (123).

1958 The Shah establishes SAVAK, the secret police that act against political dissenters.

1963 The White Revolution, initiated by the Shah and supported by President Kennedy, implements further secularization.

1963 Ayatollah Khomeini, now Shi'ite leader, challenges the Shah, only to be arrested and exiled to Iraq.

1971 The Shah celebrates 2500 years of Persian monarchy.

1971 Siahkal uprising, armed struggle against the Shah by socialists.

1973 Iran doesn't participate in the Arab oil embargo, which means tremendous profits for the Shah.

December 31, 1977 President Jimmy Carter on a visit to Iran proclaims Iran "an island of stability in an otherwise troubled Middle East" (Dabashi 157).

1978 Increasing large public demonstrations against the Shah signify opposition of urban guerrilla movements and the clerics. On "Black Friday" in September the Shah's army opens fire on protesters, killing and wounding many. In October Khomeini flies to France to direct the revolution from there. The Shah appoints a series on prime ministers in an effort to regain control of the country as demonstrations become increasingly violent.

1979 The Shah leaves the country on January 16 for Egypt, Morocco, the Bahamas, Mexico, and then the US, where he undergoes treatment for cancer. He eventually settles in Egypt, where he dies on July 27, 1980.

Dabashi: "Iran's status as a client of the United States also necessitated the suppression of Marxist and socialist ideas, in a country that was in the immediate vicinity of the Soviet Union and serving as a major U.S. bulwark to check and balance Soviet expansionism in the region and secure its own domination" (148).

1979- present: The Islamic Republic

1979 January 19, a million Iranians celebrate in Tehran, calling for the formation of an Islamic republic and the return of Khomeini.

February 1, 1979 Khomeini returns in triumph to Iran and appoints Mehdi Bazargan prime minister for a provisional government while the Islamic constitution is drafted.

November 4, 1979 Militant students seize the American embassy in Tehran and hold 52 American diplomats hostage there for 444 days. A US attempt to rescue the hostages on April 24, 1980, results in humiliating catastrophe when the American helicopters and planes crash in the desert with heavy casualties. The hostages will finally be released on Reagan's inauguration, January 20, 1981.

1980 January 25, the first Iranian president, Abu al-Hassan Bani-Sadr, is inaugurated. He'll be dismissed and exiled by Khomeini in June 1981.

1980 In September, Saddam Hussein invades Iran, with the support of the US, Europe, and the Soviet Union. This is the beginning of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War.

Consider the other upheaval in the region:

The Russians invade Afghanistan

Military coup in Pakistan

Assassination of Saudi King Faysal

Peace treaty signed between Egypt and Israel followed by assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat.
Israel invades and occupies Lebanon.
During the war, the US sold arms to both Iraq and later Iran (Dabashi 170).

Dabashi writes of Khomeini's rule: “The shah’s tyranny seemed pathetic in comparison to the violence Khomeini inflicted on the nation. He ordered the swift and brutal execution of anyone who even seemed to challenge his vision of an Islamic republic. Old army officers and aging former politicians were arrested and summarily executed, as were young revolutionaries, juvenile activists, Kurdish rebels, women protesting the imposition of a medieval code of conduct on them, leaders of religious minorities, poets, journalists – anyone and everyone who dared to make the slightest public protest against the cruel theocracy that Khomeini had dreamed, ordered, legislated, and institutionalized with unsurpassed punishment, ascetic precision, and mystical conviction”(163).

Dabashi notes that at the time of the revolution, 50 % of the population of 35 million lived in “rural areas, with very limited and primitive means of transportation, communication, and economic exchange.” Five million lived in Tehran. As many as 60% of Iranians were under the age of 25. But there is a very effective network of communication through the mosques, especially for distributing letters and cassettes of Khomeini’s calls to action (139-140).

Dabashi also says of the revolution: “This was a national liberation movement that arose from a multiplicity of economic, social, and ideological sources and aspirations. One particularly powerful and merciless Islamist faction ultimately managed (shrewdly and brutally) to outmaneuver all other factions, hijack the revolution, and call it ‘Islamic’” (146).

“It is imperative to keep in mind that when the Iranian Revolution began its momentous course it was *not* an Islamic revolution; it mutated into a radical Islamic movement through a long, repressive, brutal, and viciously calculated process, with the followers of Khomeini systematically destroying all their political rivals – both Islamist and secular” (Dabashi 183).

1988 July 20 Iran accepts a UN-sponsored peace treaty that ends the war with Iraq.

1989 Khomeini dies and is succeeded by Ali Khamenei. Rafsanjani becomes president, serving until 1997.

1990 August Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, First Gulf War (1990-1991), repulsed by American forces.

1997 Mohammed Khatami elected president, serving until 2004.

2002 President Bush designates Iran, along with Syria and North Korea, as the Axis of Evil.

2003 March the US invades Iraq.

2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad becomes president of Iran. Dabashi calls him a populist candidate, supported by the poor and also by the militant Islamists (221).

Dabashi on women in Iran: He is scathing in his contempt for Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which he believes tries to justify American intervention in Iran to free women from cultural oppression: “Iranian women have struggled for their own freedom,

in their own terms, in their own homeland, for generations – both against the horrid patriarchal aspects of their own ancestral culture and against the equally dehumanizing designs of outsiders on their homeland” (153).