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## Iran

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**IRAN**

A lecture delivered by  
*Mr. Edwin M. Wright*  
at the Naval War College  
January 18, 1949

Iran, formerly called Persia by the West, is a large area of 628,000 square miles consisting mostly of rugged mountain ranges higher than any in Europe and comparable to our western Rocky Mountains in height, length and breadth. Similar to Utah, Nevada, Idaho and Wyoming in appearance, it suffers from excessive aridity in most areas. While the great central desert plateau has an elevation of three to four thousand feet, it receives only three to four inches of annual rainfall and is therefore exceedingly sparsely populated. The chains of mountains on the west and north catch the moisture of rising currents of air and so are blessed with some 20 inches of rain per year while on the slopes of the Elburz, facing the moisture laden winds crossing the Caspian Sea, a total of 60-80 inches of rainfall affords life to a mass of tall and tangled jungle growth. On the steamy Caspian Sea coast, these jungles have been cut down and intensive rice cultivation has been introduced, thus supplying livelihood to the most concentrated population in the country.

Geography has had an important role to play in the history of Iran. The jagged mountain barriers have tended to isolate the people from the Arabs to the west, the Slavic hordes to the north, and the Indic masses to the east. Yet natural passes through the mountains have tended to make Iran a bridge of communications for great migrations and trade. Since antiquity, the great silk route from China to the shores of the Mediterranean traversed Iran,

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witnessing invasions of Indo-Iranian tribes as early as the XII Century B. C., to be followed by Parthians, Greeks, Huns, Turks, Arabs and Mongols. While the gates of the Caucasus successfully held off the pressures of the Slav for centuries, they finally were captured in the early Nineteenth Century by Russia, exposing Iran also to infiltration from the north. So, while the almost impassible mountains have helped to preserve a definite Iranian culture and people, the great highways and Iran's strategical position have invited numerous incursions, thus creating strong racial, linguistic and cultural cleavages. The 14 to 16 million people can be classified several ways: as mountain tribesmen, agricultural peasants or town dwellers. Linguistically, one finds the major languages are: Persian, Kurdish and Turkish, with emphatic dialectical differentiations such as Luri, Gilaki and Bakhtivari in each group. In addition, Arabic, Syriac and Armenian are native languages spoken by minority communities. Economically, there is a small privileged land holding aristocracy, a small artisan town class and a large sharecropping agricultural peasantry. Education is limited to a few in the cities and towns and most of the population is illiterate. With all this deep and ancient diversification of patterns, there is a basic Iranian unity of character that has survived.

The Iranian is usually hospitable and courteous but, because of centuries of conquests, he is also suspicious of strangers. He is conscientious regarding the welfare of his family and helping his friends, but he lacks broader social responsibility. He works hard for meager returns. Ages of poverty have dulled his sensitiveness to general human suffering. Herodotus, in the IV Century BC, remarked that, of all nations, the Persians were the quickest to adopt foreign traditions. This adjustability has had both good and bad effects on Iranian character. While at times they have superficially borrowed the outward forms of a strange culture, they have failed to grasp its inner values. Yet in other cases they have seized the kernel of a foreign idea, synthesized it with the genius of their own

and created a new and richer culture. Borrowing the art forms of the Assyrians, they made them more graceful and vital in their own distinctive Persian developments. In their religious contributions they permanently enriched both Judaism and Christianity. In military tactics, they evolved both positional warfare by building heavy stone castles a thousand years before they appeared in Europe, and by the Second Century A. D. they created the heavily armed Kataphracti or armored Knight, who dominated military tactics during the middle ages in Europe. Taken all in all, the Iranian contribution to the west is impressive both in quantity and quality.

Up to the beginning of the sixteenth century Iran occupied a central position in the world's stage and both received and radiated influences to regions ranging as far as from China to the Atlantic. However, the revolution in geography that came about as a result of the discovery of the western world and the circumnavigation of the globe, dislocated Iran's world orientation, disrupted her trade and radically reduced her importance. An era of internal stagnation made Iran an easy prey to prowling imperial forces. Russia launched a series of aggressive wars, detaching province after province from the north, while Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century, anxious to create a buffer state between Russia and India, assisted in splitting off the eastern provinces to form the puppet state of Afghanistan.

By the beginning of this century, it looked as though Iran had come to the end of her long and remarkable national life. Internal decay had almost paralyzed all phases of national life. In the early 1900's the mounting tensions in Europe, associated with the rise of Germany, stimulated Great Britain to find a potential ally in Russia. So, in 1905 the British sent Sir Arthur Nicholson as Ambassador to St. Petersburg with instructions to sound out Russian desires. Russia eventually replied that she would favor an

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agreement with Great Britain, thus isolating Germany, if Great Britain would recognize primary Russian interests in certain parts of the Far East, Tibet and in Iran. Here Russia touched a tender spot in the British strategy of defending her Empire, for Iran controls the land approaches to both the Suez Canal and India and also would afford Russia free access to the seven seas. Yet the necessity of weaning Russia away from Germany was so great that by 1907 Great Britain and Russia signed a secret partition of Iran, by which Russia was granted a large area in the north for "a special sphere of interest" while Great Britain retained a broad strip controlling the Persian Gulf. Iran was not consulted. Dramatic events soon followed in both spheres. The Russians soon found excuse to intervene in a military way and occupy northern Iran, while in the south the British struck oil in deposits so rich that there soon followed an international scramble for the rights and control of this fabulous discovery of wealth and power. The events of 1907 were epochal for Iran inasmuch as they brought that almost forgotten country once more under the focus of world interest. Russian penetration and oil remain the keys to understanding the theme of subsequent history in Iran. Let me belabor these two points for a few moments. First that of Russian penetration.

As early as 1906, the Czars had indicated that they desired all of Iran as the price of entering an entente with Great Britain. The introduction of Russian troops in all northern Iran in 1909 had only half realized the Russian goal, but this aroused a nascent nationalism in Iran which resulted in an appeal to the United States for help. In order to strengthen Iranian independence, the United States recommended a financial adviser, Mr. Morgan Shuster, to assist Iran. But soon after his arrival in 1910, he ran afoul Russian intrigues and under pressure of Russian threats, he was expelled from Iran. His book "The Strangling of Persia" became a classic study of the tactics of encroachment by a great power.

During World War I, Iran became a battlefield. Russian forces used Iran as a corridor through which to outflank Turkey. Germany organized a Fifth Column with which to attack the oil wells while the British introduced forces to protect them. Iran was impoverished and all central authority crushed by these events but a strong resentment toward Europe had developed—a xenophobia that was to mould Iranian foreign policy for the next generation. Iran wanted no vestige of foreign influence to remain but there was no internal power to implement this desire. However, chaos gave birth to a rampant nationalism which was seized upon by a clever, stubborn but uneducated army officer called Riza Khan. By a series of *coup d'etats*, he took hold of the reins of authority, injected some discipline in the army and rapidly promoted himself through successive steps to Prime Minister. In 1925, he exiled the inept, worthless, degenerate monarch, Ahmed Shah, and followed this the next year by crowning himself King. Having gained supreme authority, Riza Shah launched Iran on a program of reforms and development, totalling a capital investment of nearly \$250,000,000 by 1939, which amazed everyone. Iranian life underwent drastic adjustments in an effort to make Iran self-sufficient and to cut loose from all foreign penetration. The plan borrowed many details from that promulgated by Mustafa Kemal of Turkey but it had glaring defects. Riza Shah developed a megalomania, a vindictiveness and greed which sabotaged much of the good at which his reforms were aimed. So, while outwardly great strides were made in security, education, health, transportation and centralization of authority, an excessive price was paid in the growth of graft and in depressing the purchasing power of the peasantry. However, the period 1925-39 was one of outward splendor and independence.

The U. S. S. R. had officially kept a proper attitude toward Iran but with the sign of an international war appearing in 1936 when Italy attacked Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War broke out,

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large groups of Soviet trained Iranian revolutionaries were secretly sent to Iran to penetrate and capture the immature laboring groups and idealistic intelligentsia. They were unusually successful in spite of police raids and vigilance, so that by 1939, there was a substantial and competent Soviet Fifth Column prepared to operate. Then in the fateful Nazi-Soviet Pacts of 1940, the USSR insisted "that its territorial aspirations center south of the national territory of the Soviet Union in the direction of the Indian Ocean." Thus Iran lay directly athwart the path of Soviet expansion. Assured by Germany of a free hand, the USSR began to look for a pretext for intervention. It came from an unexpected quarter a year later, three months after Hitler had violated his pact and attacked the Soviet Union from the west.

Iran desperately clung to the hope that she could remain neutral but the presence of a small German colony added to the need for opening a route by which supplies could reach the Soviet Union and prompted the USSR and Great Britain to send in troops on August 25, 1941. Resistance collapsed in four days, while in the wake of the Red Army there appeared a well trained cadre of agitators, labor organizers and terrorists, who at once began to infiltrate the army, the government, labor groups and political organizations. This process was slowed because of the presence of British and U. S. troops who were handling Lend Lease shipments across Iran, and because President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill at the Teheran Conference in December 1943 persuaded Mr. Stalin to sign the agreement declaring a common desire to protect the integrity of Iran. But as World War II came to a close in Europe and Asia, the machinery of rebellion was placed in motion and under the protection of Red guns, an autonomous government was established in Azarbaijan, Iran's richest province adjoining the Soviet border. Then after all other foreign troops had left, and in violation of treaty agreements, the Red Army remained in Iran until the Kremlin felt

that it had established firmly the puppet government of Azarbaijan and, through obtaining a joint Soviet-Iranian oil agreement, had guaranteed future domination of all northern Iran. This activity led to a heated clash at the United Nations when Iran complained of Soviet interference in her internal affairs and the United States took the lead in challenging Soviet activity. By March 1946 the East-West clash was obvious and Iran had been the first issue to expose it.

During the past three years the Soviet Union has pulled out every stop except that of open military invasion, to try to break down the will of Iran to resist. Diplomatic threats, military demonstrations across the border, radio blasts, fomenting of strikes and accusations of plotting aggression against the USSR; all these have failed to bend Iran to submission. Increasing royalties from oil production and advice from U. S. military missions have aided Iran during this period of tension. And, although temporarily frustrated, the USSR still considers Iran the center of her territorial aspirations, because the Soviet leaders know that, with Iran in their grasp, all land communications between Asia and Europe would be disrupted and new continents exposed to the march of revolution.

Iran was the goal of many a conqueror because of her valuable position as related to communication. But to this prize of Iran has been added that of vast oil resources discovered, as I mentioned, in 1907. Although the estimates of oil reserves is quoted at four billion barrels, less than one-sixth of the country has been explored. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company holding the concession is fifty-five percent a British Government investment. The peculiar geology of the oil domes makes it possible to extract immense quantities of oil with a small investment. From about sixty-five wells, a total of 500,000 barrels a day is being produced. One well at Gaj Saran, brought in in 1913, is still producing nearly 7,000 barrels per day without being put to the pump. Its total production



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in thirty-five years has totalled nearly 90,000,000 barrels, and it seems capable of continuing this indefinitely. The average well in the U. S. A. brings in twelve barrels per day. This valuable asset was of vital importance during the past war. Iranian oil was the main source of power for the British Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Armies, the U. S. Ninth Air Force while stationed in Egypt and Chennault's Tigers in China. It supplied these needs in addition to the civilian demands of the Near East and India as well as West Africa. Last year U. S. marketers, such as Socony Vacuum and Standard Oil of New Jersey, negotiated for a purchase of \$250,000,000 of Iranian oil with which to supply their European markets.

Oil has thus become a dramatic element in Iranian life. It makes possible those economic developments which will end the age old poverty under which Iran has suffered. It contributes to the development of Europe and to safeguarding our own oil resources. But these very factors make it a danger to the survival of Iran as an independent state. While the Soviet Union is on the prowl and hoping to seize Iran both for its central strategic position and its petroleum wealth, Iran finds itself under heavy strain to survive. It has one more chance. If it can develop responsible leadership, utilize its resources honestly and develop a social conscience, then class and regional separatism will decrease and a healthy nation will face its tasks with high hopes of a national future. Again the United States will be called upon for help. About 600 Iranian students are now being educated in graduate and post graduate courses in the U. S. A. American engineers are advising on a large seven year economic development plan. U. S. dollars will be asked to supply a part of the machinery essential for economic exploitation of Iran's wealth.

So the turning wheel of fate has brought these two countries, Iran and the U. S. A., one of the world's oldest and one of the newest, into close and intimate association. Each one needs the con-

tribution of the other toward building a healthy and stable world society. And while we still represent the greatest warehouse and arsenal of democracy, Iran holds a position on the front line combating totalitarianism and aggression. In spite of all her weaknesses and defects, Iran has shown a will to survive. Only *there* was the iron curtain pushed back by the determination of its own people. And where such a will to be independent exists, it deserves our encouragement and cooperation.