

Could Iran Collapse?

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Iran has proven a complex and difficult country for the US to have a coherent foreign policy. It is not just in the Middle East, but also (before the Soviet collapse) has historically shared borders with Russia, Turkey, and India (prior to Pakistan), propelling it into South Asian politics. It is a Muslim country, but for 1300 years, not part of the Arab-Muslim world, even following a dissident sect (Shi\222a) hostile to mainstream Sunni Islam.

Iran (formerly Persia) has a 2500-year existence with continuity of culture and language and a past that included not only three successful empires, but a culture that even today extends well beyond its current borders. Persian culture, including language, architecture, food, and arts, extends across the old Silk Route, a string of trading cities between Persia and China, and in Russia\222s Caucuses.

Iranians are survivors. Even after they were conquered by Arab Muslim rulers in the 7th century and Mongol destruction in the 13th century, they managed to reassert their identity and language and even insinuated themselves into their conquerors\222 administrations. The most elegant things in Muslim culture: arts, architecture, and courtly foods and styles, were all Persian, influencing the outer form of the Muslim world as far as Spain on the west and India on the east.

Iran\222s extraordinary cultural dominance survived, century after century, with a population of no more than 20 million at its best. Wars and disasters (such as Mongol near-genocides and World War I destructions, reduced the population to barely 10 million and falling. Iran nearly vanished as a country by 1920, but was saved by a new Shah, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who undertook to revive the culture and national identity and push it into the modern world. By the end of the Pahlavi dynasties when the Islamic Revolution took over, the population was 40 million, and was rapidly modernizing, with an elected parliament and greatly enlarged literacy.

Under the Islamic Republic, a repressive and fanatical regime hostile to modernization or real democracy, with a policy of reversing the Pahlavi emancipation of women, the population soared to 80 million. The consequences are now looming over Iran\222s survival. They are running out of water.

A photo in the San Francisco Chronicle (July 20, 2018) shows the great bridges in Esfahan, my favorite city, which resembles Florence, Italy in architectural beauty. Bridges that spanned a great river that watered the city and its rich agricultural environs now loom over a dry riverbed, with a woman and child walking on it. No water at all.

Villages that have survived for millennia, providing the nation\222s food, watered by an ancient system of snow melt from mountain tops, brought to the plateau by earthen tunnels, are now dry. Peasants are fleeing to the outskirts of big cities, and they are angry. They are outraged by the government\222s preference for spending money to defend Syria\222s dictator and other clandestine wars while ignoring domestic needs. The urban population has long resented militant Islam, preferring a western-style modern culture; and now the rural population, once the government\222s religious base, is alienated too.

Iran\222s earliest modernizing revolution in 1905 established a short-lived republic with a parliament and constitution. It was aborted when their neighbor, Russia, sent in troops to destroy it, handing back power to the corrupt Qajar Dynasty.

The Qajars were replaced by the Pahlavis, father and son, authoritarian but modernizers. The last Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza, in 1979, hoped to complete his father\222s program of modernization of all the country\222s institutions so that his own successor, the American educated prince now living in exile, could preside over a constitutional modern monarchy.

The Islamic Republic is under fire on all sides, internal and external. Peaceful demonstration have been savagely put down. A medieval-minded dictatorship developing nuclear weapons has frightened the neighborhood. If President Trump, with a wrecking ball approach, pushes for "regime change," he may get Iran\222s total collapse into anarchy.

Iran is the only country in the Middle East (aside from Israel) ready for modern, educated self-governance. "Regime change" gave us the chaos in Iraq and Syria. Good foreign policy requires learning from our mistakes. We need grownups in the room.

683 words

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