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The Crisis with Iran At A Glance

FACT SHEET

Population: 68 million (26% under age 14).

Location: Middle East bordering Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea. Shares borders with: Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan & Armenia .

Area: 1.648 million sq km (slightly larger than Alaska)

Religious composition: 89% Shia Muslim, 9% Sunni Muslim, and 2% Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i

Ethnicity: Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%

Languages: Persian 58%, Turkic 26%, Kurdish 9%, Luri 2%, Balochi 1%, Arabic 1%, Turkish 1%, other 2%

Resources: Ranks second in the world for proven crude oil reserves; has significant undeveloped gas resources.

History The ancient Persian Empire was the world's first empire (550BC). It was known for its respect for local traditions, laws, languages, and religions. The first emperor, Cyrus the Great, freed the Jews from captivity in Babylon and helped them to reconstruct their temple in Jerusalem. The empire lasted almost 200 years and gave civilization its first Charter of Human Rights and a commerce system. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain and Russia competed for control of Iran and its oil resources. Britain eventually took control and established the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company to control Iran's oil resources. In an effort to counter-balance decades of unwelcome foreign interference, Iran made overtures to the United States. Later, in 1953, when Mohammad Mosadeq was elected leader with promises to nationalize Iran's oil, the CIA organized a coup and replaced him with the pro-American Shah who was overthrown by the 1979 revolution.

Politics: Following the popular revolution that ended 26 years of US influence and control in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini took power. Rather than bringing the expected democracy, Khomeini established a religious dictatorship or theocracy that increased the repression of the Shah's era. The regime has had a notorious human rights record. Its rule has been marked by frequent demonstrations that have resulted in the imprisonment and execution of thousands of Iranians. Until the new hard-line President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected in June 2005, the Iranian government had relaxed many of the strict laws governing dress code and behaviour due to their widespread rejection by the Iranian public. This was interpreted as a sign by many that the government was slowing losing its iron grip on the nation.

Foreign and Defence Issues: Iran signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty when it opened for signature in 1968, and was the first state to call for a Nuclear Weapon-Free
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Zone in the Middle East within the UN framework in 1974. Despite having vast energy (oil) resources, it has developed a nuclear energy program including uranium enrichment. Iran acquired a vast arsenal of sophisticated American weaponry under the Shah regime (1953-1979) but lacked the domestic expertise and the spare parts to utilize much of this capability without US support. In recent years it has developed a ballistic missile capability including the Shahab-3 missile that has a range of 1300 km. and could therefore reach Israel and US military bases in the Gulf region.

Resources:

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