

# **Concise Essay on the Achaemenid Persian Empire in Iran(550-330 BCE)**

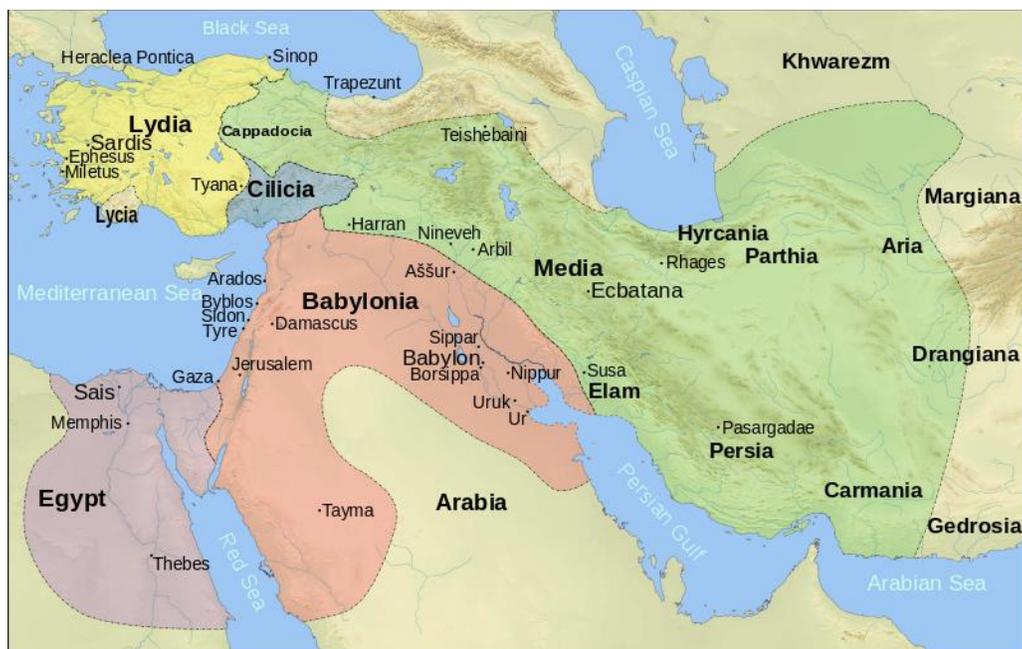
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## The Achaemenid Empire in Persia (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE)

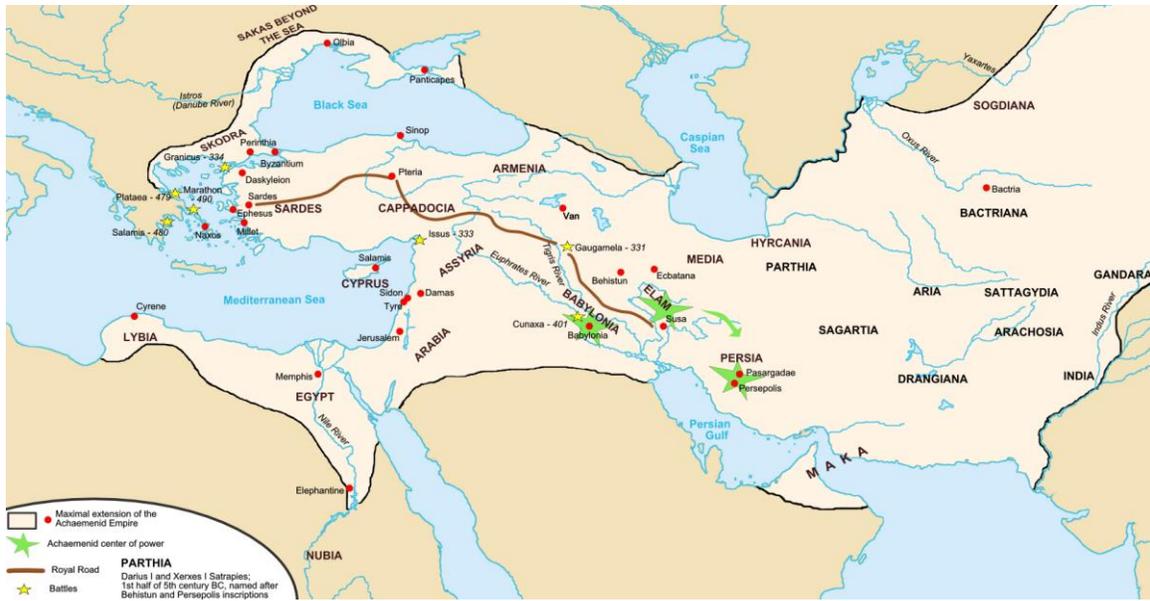
**Origins.** How did the Achaemenid Empire in Persia originate? Cyrus II (the Great, ruled 550-530 BCE) was the founder-king of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. In a coup d'état, Cyrus defeated his grandfather, Astyages, the King of Media, and incorporated the vast Median Kingdom into a new Persian Empire.



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### *The Median Kingdom (625-550 BCE, Green Area)*

Cyrus expanded his empire by conquering gold-rich Lydia in Anatolia (in 546) and fertile Babylon in Mesopotamia (539), and his son Cambyses, brought Egypt under Persian control (525).



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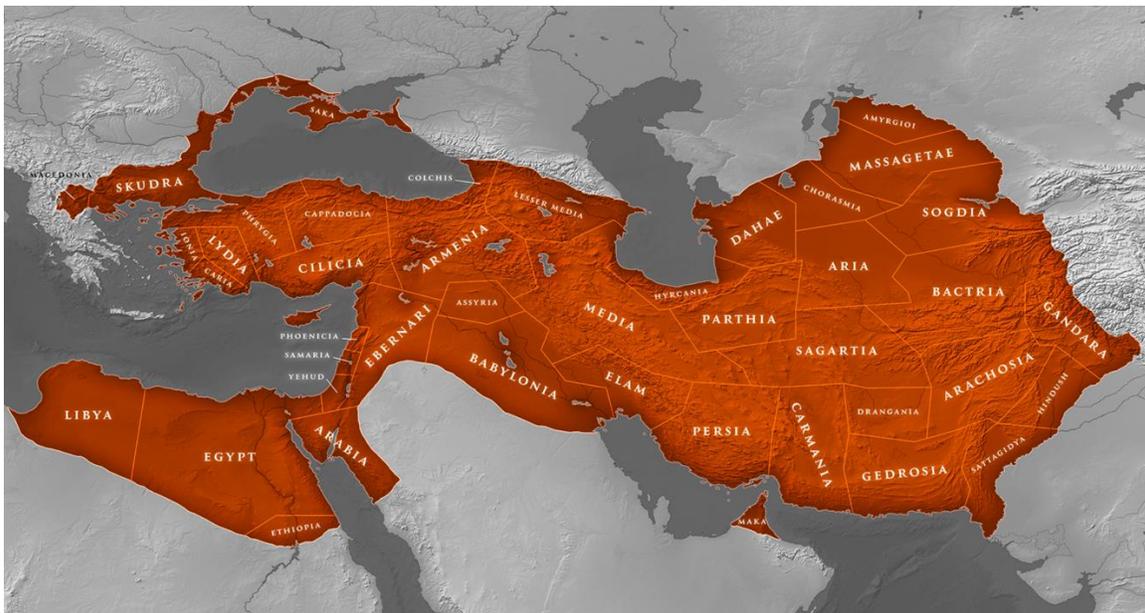
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### *Expansion of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-525 BCE*

Achaemenid Persia reached its territorial apogee under its third ruler, Darius I (the Great, ruled 522-486 BCE), who was a brilliant militarist and an astute administrator. Darius ruled over and received taxes from 30 tributary states, stretching from Macedonia in Southeastern Europe to the Punjab in South Asia and including Egypt in North Africa and Phoenicia in the Near East.

**Wealth.** In the Achaemenid Empire in Persia, what were the main sources of wealth and power – agriculture, foreign trade, and foreign conquest? Achaemenid Persia based its wealth on two

pillars – purposeful conquests of rich neighbors and a fertile agricultural heartland. During its peak in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, Achaemenid Persia became the world’s richest empire by controlling the key wealth-producing states in the Near East – Lydia (gold mining), Babylonia (agriculture), Phoenicia (maritime trade), and Egypt (agriculture).



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*The Achaemenid Persian Empire At Its Peak, c. 490 BCE*

Both Cyrus, the founder, and Darius, the consolidator and expansionist, ruled benevolently in their diverse empire of thirty tributary states in three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe). The

Achaemenids installed Persian governors (*satraps*) in the conquered areas to ensure stability, promote agriculture and trade, and collect taxes for the imperial center.

The Persian *satraps* increased agricultural productivity by introducing *qanats* (underground aqueducts) to expand irrigated acreage, diversify crop choice, and raise crop yields. The expansion of *qanats* within Persia also increased the agricultural tax base at the imperial center. Achaemenid officials promoted and taxed foreign trade within the empire. The new Royal Road stretched for 1700 miles on an east-west axis across the empire to enhance land-based trade. The Achaemenids encouraged maritime trade by building ports on key trade routes and by constructing a canal in Egypt to connect the Red and Mediterranean Seas. Astute foreign conquest was a critical source of wealth for Achaemenid Persia.



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xtent.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Achaemenid_Empire_at_its_Greatest_Extent.jpg)

*The Royal Road in the Achaemenid Empire, c. 500 BCE – 1700 Miles From Susa (Southern Persia) to Sardis (Western Anatolia)*

**Control.** What forms of political organization and religious persuasion did the leaders of the Achaemenid Empire in Persia use to extract wealth for the elite and maintain imperial power? Cyrus II and Darius I set the gold standard for imperial administration. They designed a system of political organization that was emulated

by imperial administrators for nearly two millennia after Achaemenid Persia disappeared.

A key dimension of the Achaemenid system was religious tolerance. Although the Achaemenid rulers practiced the Zoroastrian religion, they did not create a theocracy and base their political legitimacy on claims of their divinity. Instead, they encouraged tributary peoples to practice their own religions and cultural traditions.

A second central aspect of the Achaemenid political system was indirect rule. The Achaemenid leaders appointed Persian nobles as *satraps* (regional governors) to oversee tax collection and military recruitment. But local governance was carried out mostly by members of regional ethnic groups. Tributary peoples could largely govern themselves so long as they paid taxes, provided troops, and behaved politically.

Cyrus set forth his benevolent ruling principles in the Cyrus Cylinder (538) – equality of ethnic groups and religions, freedom of repatriation of peoples, and restoration of cities and temples.

Darius codified the legal systems of all imperial regions, established 20 *satrapies* (governing units), and simplified tax collection by introducing an Achaemenid royal currency, consisting of *darics* (gold coins) and *shekels* (silver coins). He also installed inspectors to check the power of the *satraps*, ensure appropriate tax collections, guarantee military loyalty, and keep imperial peace. Each year during the Persian New Year (*No-Ruz*) at the Spring equinox, representatives of all 30 of Persia's subjugated ethnic groups paid homage to the king by bringing gifts (tribute) to the *Apadana* (throne hall) in Persepolis.

**Decline.** What caused the Achaemenid Empire in Persia to weaken and fall apart? The gradual decline of the Achaemenid Empire was triggered by internal erosion, a steady weakening of imperial government control. Provincial rebellions began after Xerxes reversed Cyrus' and Darius' approach of cultural tolerance and introduced oppressive policies in the 480s BCE. Royal succession crises precipitated a civil war in 401 BCE and a regicide in 336 BCE.

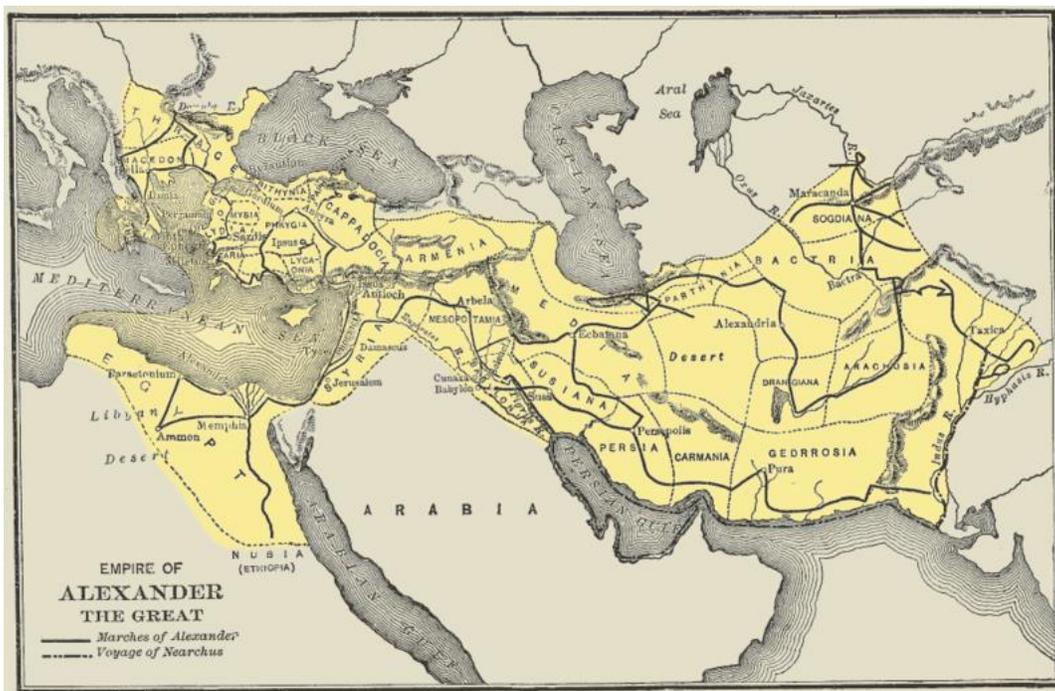
The suppression of rebellions in Babylonia, Bactria, Phoenicia, and Ionia also was very costly. The imperial treasury suffered further as satraps (regional governors) revolted against central authority, most importantly in Anatolia (366-359 BCE). When Egypt re-gained its independence from Persia (404-343), the Achaemenid Empire lost significant tax revenues. Achaemenid military strength declined accordingly.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western\\_part\\_of\\_the\\_Achaemenid\\_Empire.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western_part_of_the_Achaemenid_Empire.jpg)

*Achaemenid Persian Control of Egypt, 525-404 and 343-332 BCE*

The erosion of governmental control made the empire vulnerable to external threats. Alexander the Great of Macedonia (334-323 BCE) invaded Persia and ended the Achaemenid dynasty. Alexander was a charismatic, military-and-organizational genius. He won a series of critical battles to gain control over key pieces of the empire – Granicus River (334 BCE) for Anatolia, Issus (333 BCE) for the Levant and Egypt, Gaugamela (331 BCE) for Babylonia, and Persepolis (330 BCE) for Persia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-alexander-empire.png>

*Alexander the Great's Empire –  
After Defeating Achaemenid Persia, 323 BCE*

The Achaemenid Persian Empire thus fell completely to Alexander. But Persia remained under foreign (Hellenistic) control for less than two centuries. The Parthians, Iranian people from northeastern Iran, took the Iranian heartland and Mesopotamia from the Seleucids and formed the second Iranian empire, the Parthian Empire, in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.

**Aftermath.** After the fall of the Achaemenid Empire in Persia, what groups succeeded to power and how successfully did they wield power and extract wealth? In the aftermath of Achaemenid rule, the leaders of the successor Iranian states carried out enormous political, economic, and cultural changes. Following Alexander the Great's death from fever in 323 BCE, his generals formed three Hellenistic kingdoms. The largest, the Seleucid Kingdom, was centered in Mesopotamia and Syria and ruled from Anatolia through Persia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diadochi.png?>

### *Seleucid, Antigonid, and Ptolemaic Kingdoms, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE*

Parthia was an Indo-Aryan region in northwestern Persia at the edge of Seleucid control. The Parthian ruler, Arsaces I, seceded from the Seleucid Kingdom in 238 BCE and formed a small, independent state. A century later, Mithradates I conquered the Iranian heartland and Mesopotamia, capturing its fertile agricultural basin.



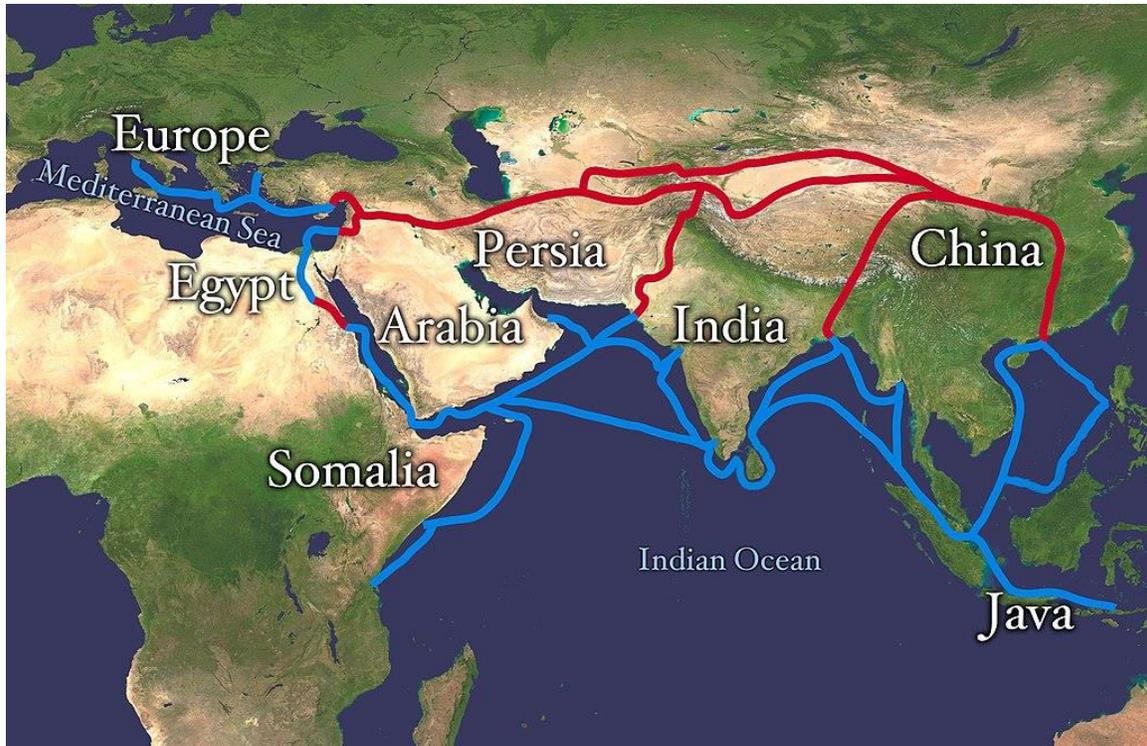
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parthia.png>>>

### *The Parthian Empire At Its Greatest Extent, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE*

The Silk Road, a trade route linking Han China with Rome by land, opened after the Parthians signed a trade agreement with China in 115 BCE. Chinese silk, porcelain, and jade were exchanged for Roman gold and glassware and Parthian horses.

The Parthian kings also benefitted from land taxes, especially in Mesopotamia. But Parthia suffered from royal succession crises and civil wars and had a longstanding conflict with the Roman

Empire over control of Silk Road trade routes. In the 220s CE, Ardashir I of Persis revolted and ended Parthian rule.

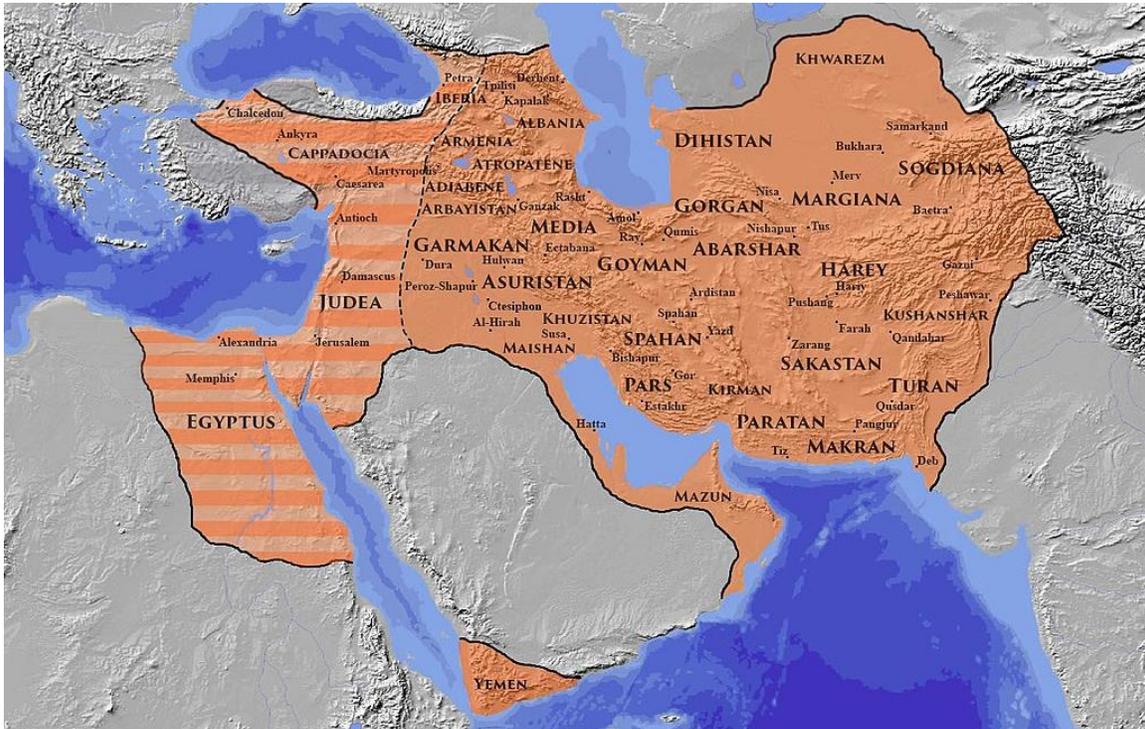


Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk\\_route.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_route.jpg)

*The Silk Road – Linking the Han Chinese and Roman Empires, 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE*

The new Sasanian dynasty, which was led by Persians and practiced Zoroastrianism, asserted control over the Iranian heartland and Mesopotamia in the 220s. Trade on the Silk Road flourished, especially after the Sasanians negotiated trade treaties with Sui and Tang China. Agriculture, especially in Mesopotamia,

was a secondary source of wealth. The main crops were barley, wheat, grapes, figs, and olives. Persian and Parthian nobles had a feudal aristocracy and checked royal power by dethroning unsuccessful kings.

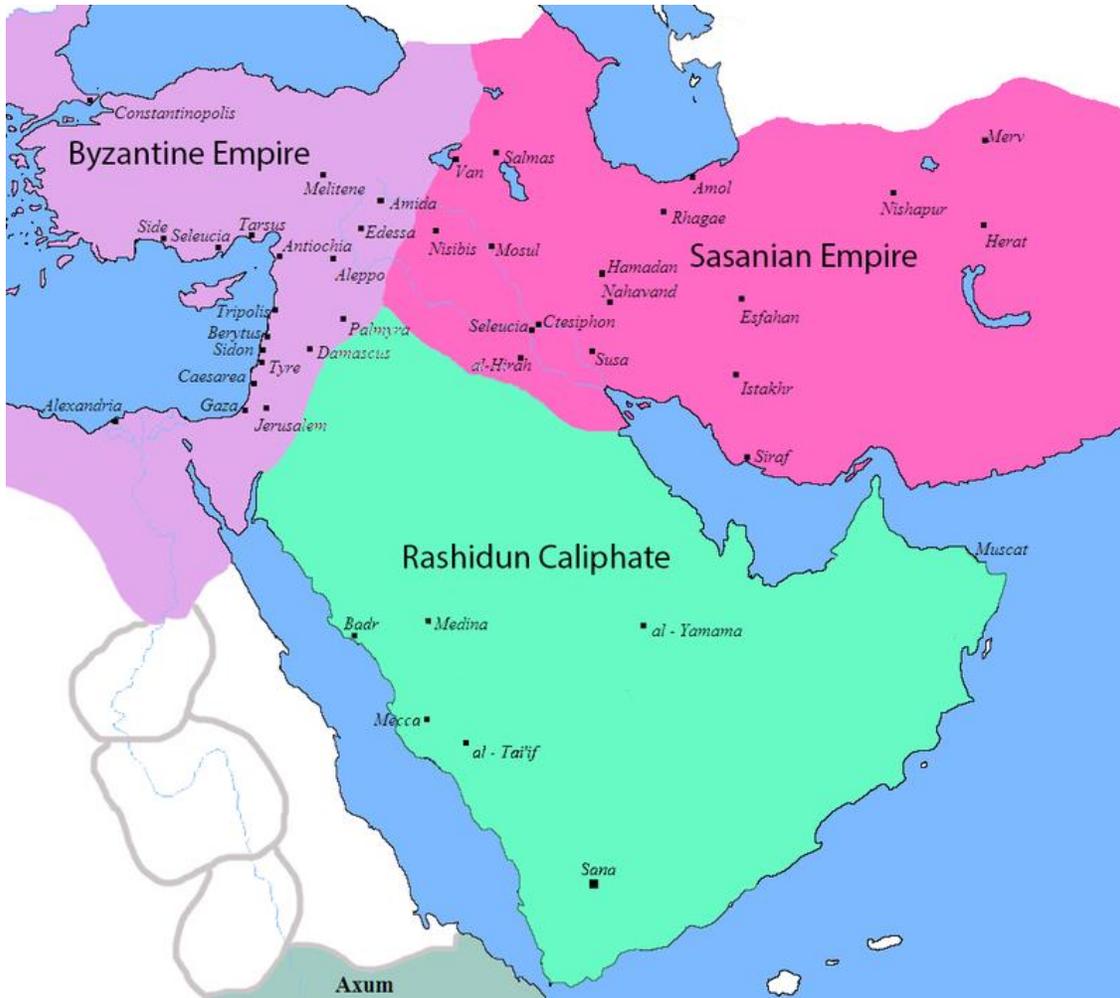


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### *The Sasanian Empire of Persia (230-651 CE) – At Its Greatest Extent, 621 CE*

Between 540 and 629, the Sasanians fought a debilitating war with the Byzantine Empire. The Arab Islamic Jihad overwhelmed Persia in the 630s and gained control in 651. The Sasanians were

vulnerable because of their costly wars with Byzantium, plague infestations, and economic decline. The Arab invaders were disciplined, mobile (with camel transport), and motivated to spread Islam and gain land.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IslamicConquestsIroon.png>

### *The Islamic Conquest of the Sasanian Empire, 7<sup>th</sup> century CE*

Foreign dynasties then ruled Iran for nearly a millennium. Arab Islamic Caliphates were in control for three centuries. The Umayyads ruled from Damascus (651-749) and the Abbasids from Baghdad (749-955).

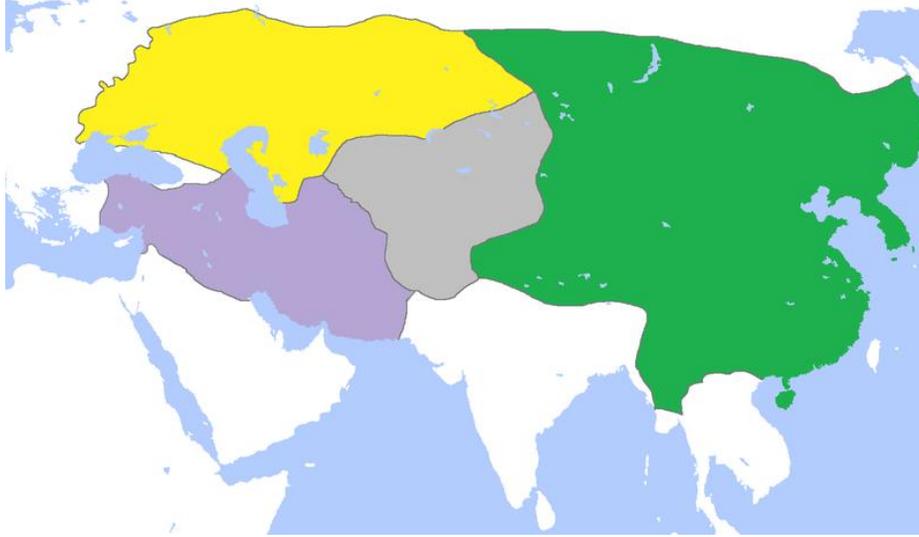


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*The Abbasid Caliphate – At Its Peak , c. 850*

Seljuk Turkish horse-warriors invaded from the northeast and established the Seljuk Turkish Empire (1040-1194). Following a destructive Mongol invasion led by Ghengis Khan (1219-1223), Hulegu, Ghengis's grandson, established a Mongol-led empire, the

Il-Khanate, which controlled Iran and Mesopotamia for seven decades (1256-1335).

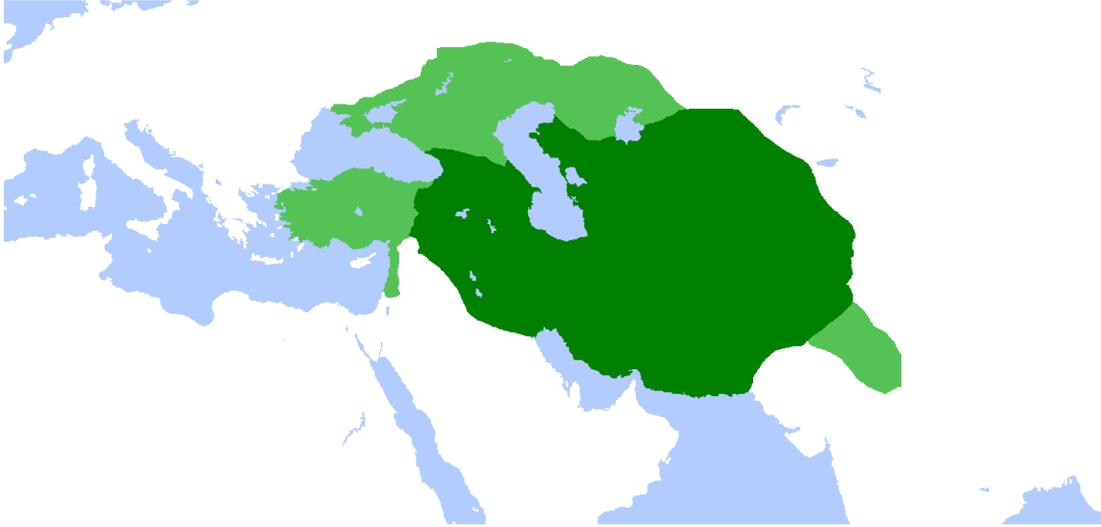


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*The Four Mongol Khanates, 1300 – Ilkhanate (Purple), Golden Horde (Yellow), Chagatai (Gray), and Empire of the Great Khan (Green)*

Temur of Transoxiana created a Turco-Mongol empire (1370-1405), and his heirs ruled eastern Iran through the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Those four foreign empires gained military control with nomadic horse archers, used Persian bureaucrats to collect their agricultural and trade taxes, and practiced Sunni Islam. All four lost control when succession crises, corruption, and divisive military settlers undercut the empire's ability to create and tax

wealth, debilitated its military strength, encouraged tributary regions to secede, and paved the way for invasion by stronger outsiders.



*Source: Wikimedia Commons available at*  
< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timurid\\_Empire\\_Map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timurid_Empire_Map.png) >

*Temur's Empire – At His Death, 1405*

Shah Ismail I founded the Safavid Empire in 1501 by leading Qizilbash (Turkmen) warriors in a series of conquests to reunify the country. Shah Abbas I (The Great, 1587-1629) consolidated the Safavid Empire. Shah Abbas conquered Khurasan (from the Uzbeks), Azerbaijan and Iraq (Ottomans), and Kandahar (Mughals). The Safavid Empire was less wealthy than its Muslim adversaries – the Ottoman and Mughal Empires.



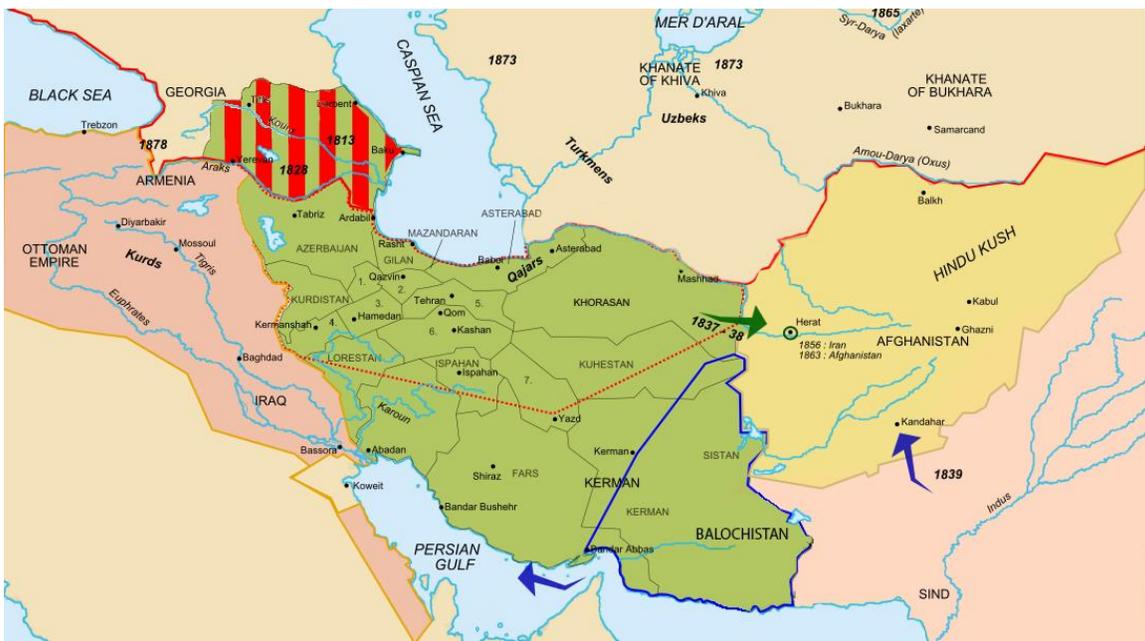
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
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*The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, c. 1700*

The Safavids’ main source of wealth and key export was silk (raw and textiles). Political legitimacy for the absolutist Safavid shahs rested on three pillars – Turkmen warriors, Persian bureaucrats, and the Shi’ite religion. The Safavid Empire declined due to gradual internal erosion. Succession crises, royal corruption, and growing support for Shi’ite religious endowments created a revenue shortage and a weakened military. In 1722, Mahmud, a leader of the Ghilzai Afghans from Kandahar, defeated

a much larger Safavid army at Gulnabad, laid siege to Esfahan (the Safavid capital), and gained the crown.

After the Safavid Empire collapsed in 1722, Iran suffered seven decades of civil war, economic decline, and population loss. Agha Muhammad, a Turkic Qajar, was the founding king of the Qajar Dynasty. He reunified Iran and declared himself shah in 1796. The Qajar consolidator was Nasir al-Din (1848-1896), who ruled long but introduced few lasting reforms.

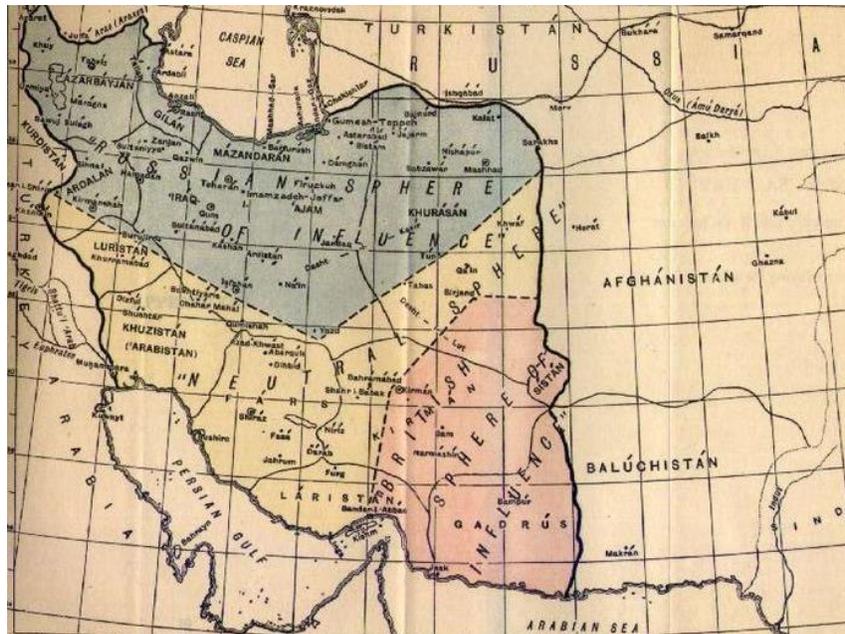


Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

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*Qajar Iran – c. 1900*

More than half of Iran's people were sharecropping peasants who worked on estates owned by the crown, the aristocracy, or religious foundations. The principal exports were silk (exported to Europe), cotton (Russia), opium (China), rice (Russia), and carpets (Europe). But Iran entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century with limited sources of wealth and revenue. As part of the Triple Entente against Germany, Britain and Russia signed the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) in which they partitioned Iran into Russian, British, and "neutral" spheres of interest.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The Russo-British Pact in 1907.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Russo-British_Pact_in_1907.jpg) >

### *Russian and British Spheres in Iran, 1907-1919*

In 1920, Iran was a failed state, threatened by British and Soviet plans for imperial control. Reza Khan, an army officer, first became minister of war (1921), next took over as premier (1923), and then deposed the Qajar shah and assumed full control (1926).

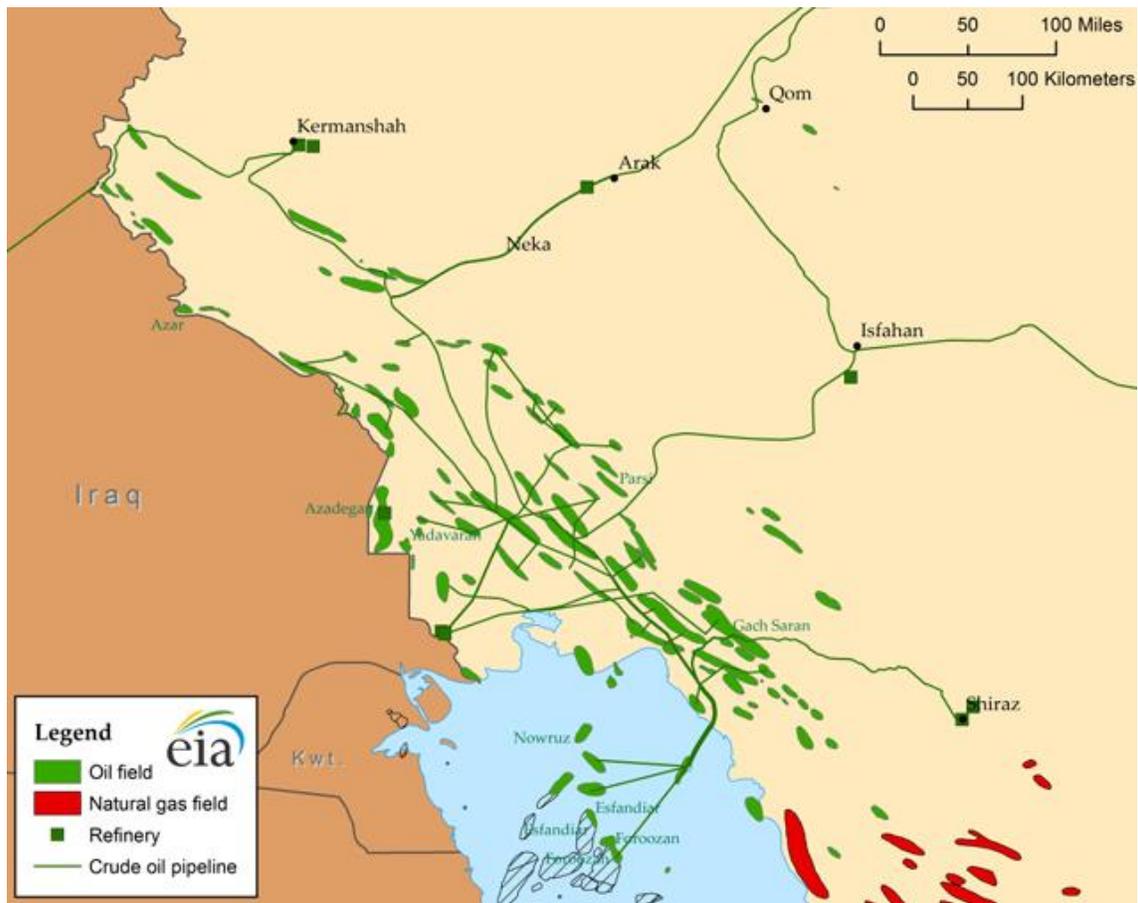
Reza Khan was crowned Reza Shah Pahlavi in early 1926 and ruled absolutely for 15 years. Reza Shah created an effective centralized government, built railroads and roads, and expanded the economy. But he ruled oppressively, permitted widespread corruption, and accumulated a vast personal fortune. The British and Soviets jointly invaded Iran in August 1941 to control Iranian oil. Iran then was the world's second leading oil exporter. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Muhammad Reza Shah.

In 1951, Muhammad Mossadeq, a charismatic politician, created a coalition of nationalist parties, gained control of Parliament, and nationalized oil. In 1953, the American CIA and the British MI6 organized a military coup d'état, Mossadeq was placed under house arrest, and the Shah re-introduced autocracy.

He blew through \$55 billion of oil revenues to maintain control. SAVAK, the intelligence service, terrorized the Iranian people with censorship and torture. By 1978-1979, Iran's people were fed up with governmental corruption, SAVAK oppression, and the maldistribution of oil wealth. A combination of populism, nationalism, and religious radicalism underpinned the popular Islamic Revolution. The Shah went into exile in January 1979.

Iran's 600,000 Shi'ite clerics sealed their control in July 1979, by winning two-thirds of the seats in the election for the Assembly of Experts, which drafted a new constitution for the Islamic Republic. The constitution of 1979 established a theocracy by creating a system of parallel institutions through which the clerics wield ultimate power. The conventional military of 400,000 troops has less power than the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of 125,000 troops supplemented by the paramilitary Basij. In all instances, the appointed clerical institutions have greater power than the counterpart elected branches of government.

Revolutionary Iran has a petroleum economy, benefitting from high oil income but dependent on fluctuating world-oil prices. In 2019, Iran was the world's ninth largest producer of petroleum and had the fourth highest global oil reserves and second largest global reserves of natural gas.



Source: U. S. Energy Information Administration, available at [eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRN/background](http://eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRN/background)

### *Major Oil Fields (Green Areas) and Crude Oil Pipelines in Iran*



Source: U. S. Energy Information Administration, available at [eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRN/background](http://eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRN/background)

### *Major Natural Gas Fields (Red Areas) and Pipelines in Iran*

Aided by high petroleum prices, between 1990 and 2011 Iran's GDP per capita (adjusted for purchasing power) grew at an annual rate of 2.3 percent and reached \$18,009 in 2011 (more than three times the level in 1979). But growth almost stopped after the imposition of UN economic sanctions in 2012, and the Iranian economy grew at the very slow rate of 0.6 percent between 2011

and 2017 (the last year of available data). In 2017, Iran had a price-adjusted income level of \$14,536 (82 percent of the world average).

Iran's oil-based economy faces difficult challenges. Unemployment is high (11.2 percent officially in 2019), inflation is regularly in double digits and shot up to average 40 percent in 2019, inefficient state-owned enterprises, controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, are impeding growth (10 percent of GDP), and direct cash transfers plus fuel subsidies are costly (20 percent of revenues).

In 2006, the US, the four other permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom), and Germany offered Iran economic aid if it would develop its nuclear energy program under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). When Iran rejected the offer, the UN Security Council introduced sanctions that limited Iran's ability to export petroleum and natural gas, obtain Western technology to produce oil and gas, and make international

transfers of funds. The sanctions also froze Iran's access to more than \$100 billion of Iranian assets held in Western banks.

In November 2013, Iran announced an agreement with the US and its five UN allies. Negotiations were completed in July 2015. In return for the UN agreeing to lift the sanctions in 2016, Iran offered to restrict its nuclear activity for at least a decade. Under the agreement, Iran was to put two-thirds of its 19,500 centrifuges in storage, reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium from 9000 kg to 300 kg, close its plutonium facility at Arak, and permit IAEA inspectors to have access to all Iranian nuclear facilities in perpetuity.

This break-through agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) then was ratified by all seven governments that negotiated it. In 2016, the UN certified that Iran was in compliance with all provisions of the JCPOA and, as promised in the agreement, lifted the international economic sanctions that had been placed on Iran. However, in May 2018, US President Donald Trump announced that the US was withdrawing from the JCPOA

and imposing bilateral economic sanctions on Iran. As a result, in 2019 Iran's GDP contracted (by nearly 8 percent), inflation soared to a level of 40 percent, and widespread demonstrations followed a decision to reduce subsidies on fuel.

**Lessons.** What lessons for contemporary powers can be drawn from the experiences of the Achaemenid Empire in Persia and of earlier rulers of Iran? A key lesson emerges from the downfall of Sargonid Assyria (911-612 BCE), a predecessor power to Achaemenid Persia. Assyria had a holy war ideology based on a belief that the Assyrian god, Assur, demanded that their kings assert universal rule through conquest. The Assyrians assembled the most powerful army that the world had ever seen and conquered the weaker city-states in the Levant. But in their attempt to conquer Egypt, the war-maddened Assyrians neglected to cover their rear flank in the east and were wiped out of existence by a coalition of neighboring Medes and Babylonians. The ancient Assyrian experience provides two related lessons – militaristic ideology based on extreme religious tenets is dangerous for the

health of empires, and attempts to control distant regions should not be made if there is potential trouble at home and next door.

A second lesson arises from the early Achaemenid leaders' close attention to the needs of ethnic minorities and practice of religious tolerance. Cyrus the Great (ruled 550-530 BCE), the founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, was both a brilliant military leader and a skilled public administrator. For political expediency, the early Achaemenid Persians governed benevolently and embraced local institutions and cultures. Cyrus recorded his ruling principles – equality of ethnic groups and religions, freedom of repatriation of peoples to their homelands, and restoration of cities and temples – in the Cyrus Cylinder (538 BCE), history's first human rights charter. Cyrus sponsored the repatriation to Israel of 10,000 Jews who had been forcibly resettled in Babylonia, and he subsidized the restoration of their temple in Jerusalem. Achaemenid Persia prospered for a century – so long as Cyrus's principles of human rights and religious tolerance were followed.

Peaceful succession of rulers is necessary for imperial continuity. Succession struggles foment palace intrigues, drain the treasury, cause military disaffections, lead to civil wars, and undermine efforts to defend against foreign enemies. Herein lies a third lesson. The decline of the Achaemenid Empire in Persia was triggered by royal succession crises. Disputes over who would rule next evolved from court intrigues (in the 460s BCE) to a civil war (401 BCE) and to a regicide (336 BCE). The suppression of rebellions in Babylonia, Bactria, Phoenicia, and Ionia was very costly. The imperial bureaucracy also splintered as regional governors revolted against central authority, most importantly in Anatolia (366-359 BCE). The erosion of governmental control opened the empire to external threats. Alexander the Great of Macedonia (334-323 BCE) invaded, ended the Achaemenid Empire, and claimed rule of Persia.



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### *Provinces of Contemporary Iran*