

(11) You Don't Have to Imagine a Great Iran. History Already Built One.

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For those asking whether Iran will become another Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya after the mullahs fall, breathe.

It will not.

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And the reason has nothing to do with optimism. It has everything to do with history.

Every modern country that collapsed into fragmentation after regime change shares one defining feature: it was a state drawn by a pen. Its borders were negotiated, stitched, and imposed by imperial hands. Its national identity was shallow because it was engineered.

Iraq did not emerge from a continuous civilizational identity called “Iraq.” It was assembled in 1920 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The British Mandate of Mesopotamia formally began in 1920 under the League of Nations system. London merged three former Ottoman provinces, Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center, and Basra in the south, into a single political unit.

These provinces contained distinct ethnic and sectarian populations, Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in central regions, and Shia Arabs in the south. They had not historically functioned as one cohesive modern national identity under a unified Iraqi state. The monarchy installed in 1921 under King Faisal I was supported by Britain to stabilize the territory, but the state itself was a twentieth-century construction built on imperial administrative convenience rather than organic civilizational continuity.

Afghanistan is older than Iraq as a political entity, but its modern borders were largely defined by imperial rivalry rather than by a single unified civilizational core. In the nineteenth century, Afghanistan functioned as a buffer state between the British Empire in India and the expanding Russian Empire in Central Asia.

The Durand Line, drawn in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan, split Pashtun tribal territories and created a boundary that remains disputed to this day. The country's borders reflected strategic concerns of empire, not the consolidation of a historically unified national structure. Power historically rested in tribal networks and regional authorities rather than centralized institutional continuity.

When modern state authority weakens there, power often reverts to tribal and regional structures, reflecting longstanding political patterns.

Libya as a unified state did not exist prior to Italian colonization in 1911. The territory consisted of three historically distinct regions: Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east, and Fezzan in the south. Italy consolidated these regions into a single colony between 1911 and the 1930s.

After World War II, Libya gained independence in 1951 under King Idris, but the state's unity rested largely on negotiated arrangements among historically separate regions. The centralized regime of Muammar Gaddafi, who seized power in 1969, suppressed regional and tribal divisions through authoritarian control rather than through deep-rooted institutional integration.

When that regime collapsed in 2011, the artificial cohesion dissolved rapidly because the unifying force had been political coercion, not civilizational continuity.

These states were political constructions. Their national identity was layered over older tribal, sectarian, and regional identities that predated the modern map.

Iran is not. Its national identity predates its modern political institutions.

Iran is one of the oldest continuous civilizations known to human history. It existed long before European colonial borders. It existed before modern nation-state theory. It existed before most of the world knew what centralized governance even was.

You do not need to imagine a great Iran. You simply need to learn its history.

Cyrus the Great did not "discover" Persia. He inherited and expanded a civilizational core that was already rooted in identity, language, administration, and culture.

In the sixth century BCE, the Achaemenid Empire governed vast territories with administrative provinces, tax systems, multilingual bureaucracy, and relative religious tolerance.

The Cyrus Cylinder was written in 539 BCE after Cyrus conquered Babylon. Today, the original cylinder is preserved in the British Museum. More than two millennia before modern constitutional democracies, this inscription articulated a governing philosophy centered on restoration rather than repression.

Instead of enslaving the conquered population or destroying the city, he issued a proclamation allowing deported communities to return to their homelands and restore their religious institutions.

Among those permitted to return were the Jewish exiles who had been deported to Babylon decades earlier. The biblical Book of Ezra records Cyrus' decree authorizing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The cylinder itself speaks in administrative language about restoring sanctuaries and returning populations across the empire. The Jewish restoration was not a special exception. It was part of a governing policy rooted in stability through restoration rather than terror through destruction.

Modern commentators often refer to the Cyrus Cylinder as an early expression of human rights principles. While that term is modern, the document undeniably reflects a governing principle rare for its time: stability through respect for local identity rather than forced uniformity.

When much of the West was still tribal, Persia was administering continents.

That civilizational architecture did not vanish with one dynasty. It evolved.

The Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE) preserved centralized administration, formalized taxation systems, and maintained diplomatic parity with the Roman and later Byzantine empires. Persia was not a tribal confederation; it was an organized imperial state with layered governance and legal hierarchy.

When the 7th-century Arab Muslim conquest reached Persia in 651 CE, the political order changed. The civilization did not. Persian administrative models, court structures, and cultural norms were absorbed into the emerging Islamic caliphates. Conquerors ruled from Persian cities using Persian bureaucratic systems.

Centuries later, the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736) reasserted Iran as a unified territorial state. After periods of fragmentation and Mongol devastation beginning in 1219 CE, Iran did not dissolve. It reconsolidated. The Safavids strengthened territorial borders recognizable in the shape of modern Iran and reinforced cultural cohesion across the plateau.

The Arab Muslim conquest did not erase Persia.

The Mongol invasion did not erase Persia.

Foreign interference did not erase Persia.

In the early twentieth century, Iran was politically weakened under the late Qajar dynasty (1789–1925). Central authority was fragile. Regional tribal leaders exercised significant autonomy. Foreign powers, particularly Britain and Russia, exerted heavy influence over Iranian territory, trade, and natural resources. Concessions such as the 1901 D'Arcy oil concession gave external actors disproportionate control over strategic assets. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention effectively divided Iran into spheres of influence without Iranian consent.

By the 1920s, Iran was formally independent but functionally constrained, with limited centralized capacity and weakened institutional coherence.

Then came the Pahlavi dynasty that rebuilt a centralized Iranian state from the fragmentation left by internal weakness, Qajar decline, and foreign interference.

Under Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941), Iran established a national army, modern judiciary, secular civil registry, and centralized taxation system. Railways were constructed, most notably the Trans-Iranian Railway, completed in 1938, physically binding the country from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Tribal autonomy that had fractured national cohesion was reduced in favor of centralized governance.

Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979), industrialization accelerated. The White Revolution reforms beginning in 1963 expanded literacy campaigns, land reform, infrastructure development, and women's suffrage. Universities expanded. Tehran emerged as a regional economic and cultural hub. Oil revenues were reinvested in highways, ports, manufacturing, telecommunications, and energy infrastructure.

By the 1970s, Iran was one of the fastest-growing economies in the region. It maintained strategic partnerships with the West while functioning as a stabilizing force in the Persian Gulf. The regional security architecture relied heavily on Iran's military and intelligence capabilities.

Women entered universities in growing numbers. The urban middle classes expanded. Literacy rates increased dramatically. Industrial output multiplied.

The Islamic Republic has ruled for 47 years. That is a regime's lifespan. It is not a civilizational lifespan.

Iranian identity did not begin in 1979. It did not begin with the mullahs. It did not begin with oil. It did not begin with foreign policy entanglements.

It began thousands of years ago.

Since 1979, the regime has attempted to recast Iranian identity through ideological Islamization. Pre-Islamic symbols were downplayed or reframed. National celebrations were restricted. Cultural expressions, including music and artistic performance, were heavily regulated. Persian identity was subordinated to religious identity. Yet despite decades of state pressure, Iranians continue to celebrate Nowruz, preserve the Persian language, honor historical figures such as Cyrus, and transmit poetry, music, and cultural memory across generations.

Iran is not a Western project waiting to collapse when supervision ends. It is not a stitched-together map dependent on imperial maintenance. It is not an artificial construct whose identity dissolves under pressure.

You may debate policy decisions. You may debate political freedoms. But you cannot deny that Iran demonstrated it could modernize without being colonized, partitioned, or dissolved.

Empires fell. Dynasties changed.

Language endured. Identity endured. Administrative memory endured.

Civilizations that survive nearly fourteen centuries of external pressure do not dissolve because a regime collapses.

This is not about my Iranian heritage, though I am proud of it. This is about history.

Before predicting chaos, learn the difference between a drawn state and an ancient civilization.

Iran is older than the crisis. And it will outlive it.

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