

People and the Land in Iran:

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A Lesson in Human Geography

Strategically located on the Persian Gulf, much of Iran's interior has a majestic but forbidding landscape. Of the country's 636,296 square miles, half lie on the Plateau of Iran, approximately 3,000 feet above sea level.

This area has a continental climate with cold winters and very hot summers and is home to two of the world's driest deserts, the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut. The term "dasht" means "covered by sand and stones." Some of the plateau is also covered by "kavir" – large, sharp-edged masses of salt.

Not surprisingly, most of Iran's approximately 66 million people live on the outskirts of the Plateau of Iran. On its arable edges farmers produce barley, wheat, cotton, grapes and sugar beets, among other crops.

Tehran, the nation's capitol, lies 70 miles south of the Caspian Sea on the Plateau of Iran, where it is home to approximately 12 million people.

The Plateau of Iran is encircled by high mountain ranges. In the north the Elburz Mountains begin to rise not far from Iran's coastline along the Caspian Sea. As moist air from the Caspian rises and condenses, it brings rainfall to the northern slopes of the Elburz range. Thus, between the seacoast and the mountain range lies a lush and fertile area with plentiful year-round rainfall.

This region is the most heavily populated in Iran. In its sub-tropical climate planters grow tea, cotton, rice and sugarcane. The Caspian region also contains most of Iran's forested area, which accounts for up to one-tenth of Iran's territory.

To the west and south of the Plateau of Iran lie the Zagros Mountains, stretching from the border Iran shares with Armenia to its southern coastline along the Persian Gulf. While broader than the Elburz Mountains, this is rugged territory, with deep gorges created by water running down the mountains. The high mountains impede travel, and of three major rivers, only the Karun River is navigable.

Iran has one of the most active earthquake zones in the world and is also prone to droughts, floods and sandstorms. Yet, despite the fact that less than one-tenth of their country is arable, Iranians have learned to adapt to their environment for centuries.

The mountainous regions of Iran are still home to some 1.2 million pastoralists, primarily herders of sheep and goats who alternate between summer and winter pastures. In the recent years many pastoralists have abandoned the mountainsides for urban centers, but because of their long history in Iran, pastoralists have enriched the biodiversity of the country's livestock. The Center for Sustainable Development & Environment estimates that Iran has twenty-seven local breeds of sheep and twenty-two indigenous breeds of camel, for example.

Villages and towns are often nestled at the foot of mountain ranges where underground water collects in oases. In order to irrigate parts of the arid central plateau, farmers learned to build qanats. Qanats are a system of tunnels that tap underground springs at mountain bases and transport water elsewhere, often many kilometers away. Because the tunnels are built underground, they prevent the water from evaporating in a dry climate.

By the end of the 20th century, only one-fifth of Iran's gross domestic product was based on agriculture, its traditional livelihood. It is the extraction and production of oil (discovered at the beginning of the 20th century) that dominates Iran's economy today, providing the Iranian government with 85% of government revenues. This revenue has provided funds to build more than 50,000 miles of paved roads, railroads, and thirty airports. Iran's main oil fields lie conveniently near its ports on the Persian Gulf.

From its antecedents in the Persian Empire, Iran has inherited an ethnically and linguistically diverse population, of which more than half now live in cities. Approximately one-half are of Persian descent (themselves of mixed ancestry), and a quarter are Azeri.

Many people have ancestors who arrived when Iran was conquered by invading Arab and later Turkic armies. Among other minorities are Kurds, Lurs, Armenians, Bakhtyari, and Assyrians. In recent years Iran has received over two million refugees from war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although Islam is the official religion, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Judaism are officially recognized minority religious communities by the state. The vast majority of Iranians are Shi'a. The Kurds (representing 7% of Iran's population) are Sunni, making them both a religious and ethnic minority.

The mountainous terrain of Iran has fostered strong tribal affiliations in many inaccessible regions of the country which various governments have tried to curtail. As people have deserted rural areas for the cities, they have helped to create a vibrant and diverse urban culture in Iran.

