Timur became the ruler of much of central Asia, conquering India, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. After his death in 1405, his empire fell apart as his sons and grandsons bickered over who would become the next leader.

**The Safavids**

In 1501, a man named Ismail led an army that would eventually take over all of Iran, Azerbaijan, part of Armenia, and most of Afghanistan. He became Shah (king) Ismail I of Iran at age fifteen. Ismail founded the Safavid Empire.

In 1587, Shah Abbas, the greatest Safavid leader, moved the capital to Isfahan, which became a model city of its time. Abbas established diplomatic links with major European nations and came to be called Abbas the Great.

**The Qajar Dynasty**

In 1779, the Qajar dynasty took control of Iran. The Qajars were Turkmen from the area currently known as Turkmenistan. Aga Mohammed Khan, the first Qajar leader, moved the capital to Tehran in 1795.

Over the next one hundred years, Iran became a pawn in the worldwide power game. Great Britain traded with Iran, both directly and through its colonies of Australia, India, Egypt, and Malaysia. Russia was interested in Iran because Iran had ports on the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Russia’s ports froze during the winter, and a warm-water port would help with international trade in India and the Far East.

Great Britain wanted to prevent Russia from gaining too much influence in Iran. Iran’s leaders began relying on British money to help pay the nation’s bills.

**Modernizing Iran**

In the late 1800s, Nasser al-Din Shah undertook a scheme to modernize Iran. He collected art, built museums and palaces, and lived lavishly. To bring in more money, Nasser al-Din sold the rights to start banks, mine natural resources, build railroads, and process Iran’s tobacco to Great Britain. But the shah kept the money for himself. As his wealth increased, Iran’s people continued to struggle.

In 1906, Iranian leaders forced the next shah, Muzaffar al-Din, to form the Majles, a group of elected lawmakers. A constitution was written, limiting the shah’s power. This period was called the Constitutional Revolution.

Oil was discovered in Iran in 1908. The British funded oil exploration, wells, and refineries. They formed the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The oil industry made huge profits, but most of the money went to British interests.

**The Last Shahs**

In 1921, Reza Pahlavi, a clever, popular military officer, organized the overthrow of the Qajar shah. At first, Pahlavi
supported a prime minister, Ahmad Shah, as Iran’s government head. By 1925, he had replaced Ahmad Shah, and the Majles officially elected Pahlavi to be shah. He became known as Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Reza Shah favored Western ways over traditional Iranian ways. Courts were no longer under the control of religious leaders. Women did not wear veils, as they were previously supposed to do. For the first time, women were allowed to divorce their husbands. Both boys and girls attended school, and women were allowed to go to college.

In the 1930s, Reza Shah, hoping to control the influence of the British and Russians on Iran’s economy, turned to a new trading partner, Germany. In 1941, in the midst of World War II, the British and the Russians were fighting Germany, and they invaded Iran because there were so many Germans there. British and Russian forces removed Reza Shah from power, and his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi took the throne.

After World War II, Iranians began the First Development Plan (1948–1955), which called for major changes in agriculture and industry. The government needed money to pay for the plan and intended to use profits from oil sales. The main oil company at the time was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Most of its profits still went to Great Britain.

In 1951, the Majles negotiated with the AIOC over equal profit sharing. When the Majles succeeded in increasing their share of the money, British oil technicians left the country. With no skilled Iranian technicians, oil production came to a standstill. Great Britain refused to buy Iranian oil and froze Iranian money in British banks.

In Iran, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and Reza Shah had opposite views about the oil crisis. Mosaddeq led
By the late 1970s, Iran was a country steeped in protests. On the surface, Iran’s economy was expanding, oil sales were high, and the country was becoming more modern.

In 1978, a Tehran newspaper made negative remarks about Ayatollah Khomeini, who was then living in Paris, France. Students from one of Tehran’s Islamic schools flocked to the streets in protest. The shah was suffering from cancer and unable to deal with a rebellion. Government forces tried to end the demonstrations, but the protests only grew. Khomeini kept in close contact with protest leaders and spurred on the rebellion. By January 1979, it was clear that the shah was losing power, and he left Iran. Khomeini arrived in Iran on February 1, 1979, and took control.

Khomeini and his followers declared Iran an Islamic republic. They placed Islamic clerics in key roles in the government and established the Assembly of Experts to write a new constitution. Under the new government, Islamic law was incorporated into the law of the land. Women were expected to cover their heads and bodies when in public. Although people were allowed to vote on their government leaders, only candidates approved by Shi'i religious leaders could run for office.

From 1980 to 1988, Iran and its neighbor Iraq fought a war over the border in southwestern Iran. Iraq invaded the region, which is one of Iran’s main oil-producing areas. The war was bloody. More than half a million Iranians had died by the time the Iran-Iraq War ended in August 1988.
Khomeini died in 1989 and was replaced by Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, who is the current supreme leader. That same year, a new constitution was written, which called for the election of a president. The first president was Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served from 1989 to 1997. Khamenei and Rafsanjani took a more moderate approach to governing. Many laws put in place under Khomeini were no longer enforced as strictly.

Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami was elected to the presidency in 1997. Khatami wanted to improve the lives of Iranians by giving them more personal freedoms. He also wanted to establish friendly relationships with several Western nations. Under Iran’s government organization, the president is not as powerful as the supreme leader. Khatami came up against strong opposition from the supreme leader and other powerful conservatives. He was unable to fulfill many of his political promises.

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative former mayor of Tehran, became president. Iran by this time was working on a nuclear program to provide energy to the nation. Many people in the West feared that the nuclear fuel Iran could produce would instead be used in nuclear weapons. Only time will tell whether Iran is actually producing nuclear weapons.