



To Understand Iran Today Read Its History, Says Britannica

Encyclopedia coverage written by leading scholars a good place to start

CHICAGO, January 14, 2010—As the government of Iran copes with civil unrest and its nuclear program remains the focus of international concern, people who want to understand the crises there would do well to read up on the country and its history, say the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.

The continuing protests over last year's contested elections spring from forces deeply rooted in Iranian society and recent historical events, suggests the encyclopedia's coverage of the country, which was written by several leading scholars.

That coverage depicts a powerful but currently isolated nation rich in natural resources, including oil, which has long been at the center of struggles for strategic supremacy in the broad region stretching from the Middle East to Central Asia. Iran has had a tumultuous history that in modern times has centered in part on conflicts between conservative Islam and secular forces influenced by the West. Though it has been an Islamic republic since 1979, Iran also has a popularly elected civil government which reformers have used to advantage, twice electing the moderate [Mohammad Khatami](#) to the presidency.

"We often think of Iran today as a monolithic theocracy, but the truth is much more complicated," said Dale Hoiberg, Britannica's editor in chief. "It's a country with a rich and ancient heritage and a young, urban, highly literate population. Many Iranians have chafed under Islamic rule and have long been vocal in saying so. At the same time,

the conservative forces remain strong. Knowing all this helps explain what's going on there today."

Not surprisingly, Hoiberg didn't hesitate to recommend the Encyclopaedia Britannica's [compendious main entry](#) on Iran as a place to start learning about the country. Some of the most preeminent Iran scholars have contributed to the article, most recently Janet Afary, professor of global religion and modernity at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of "The Iranian Constitutional Revolution."

Other Iran experts whose work appears in the article include the late Peter William Avery, former lecturer in Persian, University of Cambridge, fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and author of "Modern Iran"; and Khosrow Mostofi, former professor of political science at the University of Utah, former director of the Middle East Languages and Area Center and author of "Aspects of Nationalism: A Sociology of Colonial Revolt."

In addition to giving an extensive account of Iran's geography, culture and history from ancient Persia through the modern era, the article also includes a bibliography of additional readings for anyone who wants to learn more.

Hoiberg also recommended:

- Britannica's online [review of the events of 2009](#) in Iran, written by Keith S. McLachlan, author of several books about Iran and the Middle East.
- biographical articles on the principal political actors in Iran, including the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#), President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) and 2009 presidential candidate [Mir Hossein Mousavi](#).
- the 2007 forum on Iran archived [on the Britannica blog](#), with contributions from Barbara Slavin, Stephen Kinzer, Michael Ledeen, Scott Ritter and others;
- Britannica's one-volume "[Iran: The Essential Guide to a Country on the Brink](#)," compiled by Britannica's editors and published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Contact:
Tom Panelas
Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.
312-347-7309
tpanelas@eb.com