

Pahlavi Modernity: State Building, Oil, and Society

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Introduction

This book examines the arc of Iranian state-building and social transformation under the Pahlavi dynasty, from Reza Shah's consolidation of power to the late reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. It offers a balanced account of the far-reaching reforms that remade infrastructure, education, and industry while also tracing the political centralization and coercive practices that narrowed the space for autonomous organization and dissent. Rather than narrating modernization as either a triumph or a tragedy, the chapters that follow treat it as a negotiated, uneven, and deeply contested process that altered everyday life and the very grammar of power.

At the core of this story lies oil. Petroleum revenue enabled ambitious projects—railways across forbidding terrain, steel mills and petrochemical complexes, mass schooling and university expansion—that dramatically increased the state's administrative and material reach. Oil money also underwrote the growth of a modern military and security apparatus, financed spectacular rituals of monarchical legitimacy, and lubricated networks of patronage that bound elites to the throne. Yet these same revenues intensified dependencies, amplified regional inequalities, and made politics hinge on control over a single, volatile resource. In short, oil made modernization possible and authoritarianism durable, even as it sowed the conditions for later upheaval.

Secular modernization unfolded across multiple domains. New civil and commercial codes, standardized schooling, public health campaigns, and urban planning projects sought to recast Iran as a disciplined, legible nation-state. These reforms reshaped social hierarchies and identities: rural communities confronted land redistribution and mechanized agriculture; tribal confederations were disarmed and resettled; bazaar merchants and guilds wove new ties to bureaucrats and bankers; women navigated expanded schooling and changes in family law; students and professionals cultivated new forms of political critique. Modernity arrived not as a monolith but as a patchwork of institutions and imaginaries, opening opportunities for mobility while constraining political participation.

Authoritarian governance formed the other pillar of Pahlavi modernity. From the interwar expansion of the gendarmerie to the post-1953 consolidation of surveillance under SAVAK, the state narrowed the channels of contestation and concentrated decision-making at the center. Elections existed but were tightly managed; parties were orchestrated from above; the press oscillated between cautious experimentation and harsh restriction. The state's rhetoric celebrated "revolution" from the top—land redistribution, literacy campaigns, industrialization—while criminalizing many movements from below. This asymmetry between social modernization and political closure created a widening gap between expectations and institutions.

The Pahlavi era also unfolded within a turbulent international environment. Great-

power rivalry, wartime occupation, Cold War alignments, and the global reordering of the oil industry brought external pressures and opportunities that Iranian policymakers could neither ignore nor fully control. Foreign advisers, technocrats trained abroad, and development blueprints circulated through ministries and planning organizations. The results were hybrid: imported models adapted to local constraints, yielding both impressive growth and stubborn bottlenecks—housing shortages, inflationary spurts, infrastructural vulnerabilities, and an overreliance on imports even as domestic industries multiplied.

This book argues that the very success of Pahlavi reforms in remaking the material and social landscape heightened political demands they were ill-equipped to meet. As literacy rose and cities swelled, constituencies multiplied and expectations escalated. Oil booms magnified state capacity but also volatility; efforts to engineer society from above collided with resilient networks in the bazaar and mosque; cultural policies that sought to homogenize identity provoked spirited defense of plural traditions. By the late 1970s, a modern society had emerged whose organizational density and moral vocabularies outpaced the narrow channels of participation permitted by the state.

The chapters proceed chronologically and thematically. Early chapters trace the foundations of centralized rule and the physical making of the nation. Mid-century chapters explore the oil nationalization crisis, the 1953 coup, and the architecture of security and planning that followed. Later chapters analyze the White Revolution, rapid urbanization, the expansion of education and culture industries, and the ambivalent consequences of the 1973 oil windfall. The final chapters examine the tightening knot of prosperity and discontent—industrial growth alongside inflation, spectacle alongside skepticism, reformist rhetoric alongside coercion—that produced fractures in the late Pahlavi order and set the stage for profound transformation.

By bringing infrastructure, economy, culture, and coercion into a single analytical frame, *Pahlavi Modernity: State Building, Oil, and Society* aims to move beyond caricatures of inevitable modernization or inevitable backlash. It reconstructs how decisions made by rulers and ruled alike—ministers, engineers, workers, clerics, merchants, women activists, students, and soldiers—generated outcomes neither fully intended nor entirely accidental. The making of contemporary Iran, this book suggests, cannot be understood without confronting the twinned legacies of oil-fueled development and political closure that defined the Pahlavi decades.

Chapter One: The Rise of Reza Khan and the Foundations of State Power

At the dawn of the 20th century, Iran, officially known as Persia until 1935, found itself in a precarious state, teetering on the brink of collapse. The once-illustrious Qajar dynasty, which had ruled for over a century, had become a shadow of its former self, its authority eroded by internal strife, an empty treasury, and crippling dependence on foreign powers. The country was effectively carved into spheres of influence, with Russia dominating the north and Britain asserting its control over the oil-rich south. This geopolitical tug-of-war left the central government largely powerless, struggling to maintain order amidst tribal uprisings and widespread insecurity. It was into this volatile landscape that a formidable figure, Reza Khan, would emerge, destined to reshape Iran's destiny.

Reza Khan was born in 1878 in the village of Alasht in Mazandaran province, to a family of modest means. His father, a low-ranking military man, passed away when Reza was an infant, leading his mother to move them to Tehran. There, his uncle, a non-commissioned officer in the Persian Cossack Brigade, enrolled the 14-year-old Reza in the brigade. This cavalry unit, modeled after the Imperial Russian Army's Cossack regiments, was the only regular and effective military force in Iran at the time, ironically, controlled by Russian officers and answering to St. Petersburg.

Reza Khan quickly distinguished himself within the ranks. He was known for his bravery and fierce demeanor, earning the nickname "Reza Maxim" for his skill with a machine gun. He steadily rose through the ranks, from first lieutenant in 1911 to colonel by 1915, gaining a reputation for his military prowess, intelligence, and professionalism. His ascent was particularly noteworthy given his lack of formal education and connections.

The turning point for Reza Khan arrived with the Russian Revolution of 1917, which significantly weakened Russia's influence in Iran and left the Persian Cossack Brigade disoriented. Russian officers began losing their grip, creating a power vacuum that Reza Khan skillfully exploited to strengthen his position. By 1920, Iran had plunged into deeper chaos, with tribal uprisings rampant and the Qajar army proving utterly incapable of suppressing them. The British, concerned about instability detrimental to their interests and looking for a strong leader to secure their retreat from the country, saw an opportunity in Reza Khan.

On January 14, 1921, General Edmund Ironside, the commander of British Forces in Iran, promoted Reza Khan to lead the entire Persian Cossack Brigade. This move was a crucial step in orchestrating the impending coup. With British backing, Reza Khan, then a brigadier-general, marched his 3,000 to 4,000 Cossacks from Qazvin towards Tehran. The coup, which occurred on the night of February 21-22, 1921, was largely bloodless, with the Cossack Brigade seizing the capital with minimal resistance. Police forces, largely made up of Swedish officers, were ordered to remain in their barracks.

Upon seizing Tehran, Reza Khan, in collaboration with the political writer Sayyid Zia al-

Din Tabataba'i, declared that the Cossacks were loyal to Ahmad Shah and intended to restore order. However, his second proclamation, which began with the words "I order," signaled his true intentions: the imposition of martial law and the assertion of his authority. He forced the dissolution of the existing government and appointed Sayyid Zia al-Din Tabataba'i as prime minister, while Reza Khan himself took on the crucial roles of commander-in-chief of the army and minister of war.

Reza Khan was the undeniable power behind this new government. Within three months, he shrewdly outmaneuvered Tabataba'i, forcing his dismissal and exile. This swift consolidation of power demonstrated Reza Khan's political acumen and ruthless determination. Over the next two years, he continued to strengthen his grip, building an army loyal solely to him and bringing a semblance of order to a country long plagued by turmoil.

In October 1923, with the backing of his now loyal military forces, Reza Khan was appointed prime minister. At this point, Ahmad Shah Qajar, the last monarch of the Qajar dynasty, effectively ceded power and left for Europe, never to return. This departure created a vacuum at the pinnacle of power, sparking debates about the future of Iran's governance. Reza Khan initially harbored ambitions of declaring Iran a republic, akin to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular nationalist Turkey. However, this idea met strong opposition from both the Shi'i ulama (religious scholars) and the public, forcing him to publicly abandon the republican model.

Despite abandoning the republican idea, the monarchy could no longer continue in its previous form. For two more years, rumors persisted about Ahmad Shah's potential return, but he remained in France, unable to garner sufficient support from British diplomats or other foreign powers. Finally, in the fall of 1925, Ahmad Shah sent a telegram announcing his return, but Reza Khan responded by orchestrating mass protests against him. This decisive action cemented Ahmad Shah's permanent exile.

On October 26, 1925, the Majles (Iranian parliament) formally adopted a resolution deposing the Qajar dynasty, which had ruled Iran for 130 years. A constituent assembly then rewrote key articles of the constitution, declaring Reza Khan the new Shah of Iran. On December 12, 1925, he was officially proclaimed Shah, marking the end of the Qajar era and the beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty. Four months later, on April 26, 1926, Reza Khan crowned himself, adopting the surname Pahlavi, a name of ancient Persian origin, to signal the new dynasty's Persian rather than Turkic roots, unlike his Qajar predecessors. He also declared his six-year-old son, Mohammad Reza, as the Crown Prince.

Reza Shah's rise to power was a pivotal moment in Iranian history, marking the transition from a fragmented and vulnerable state to one with a centralized authority and a clear vision for modernization. His journey from an illiterate Cossack soldier to the sovereign of Iran demonstrated not only his remarkable personal ambition and

strategic genius but also the desperate need within Iran for a strong leader capable of restoring order and asserting national sovereignty. His initial reforms, even before his coronation, were a clear indication of the direction he intended to take the nation. He quickly began to construct a modern army, suppressing tribal autonomy and regional magnates who had long challenged central authority. This forceful establishment of state power laid the groundwork for the far-reaching transformations that would define the Pahlavi era.

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