**Iranian Family**

COMMISCEO Global. (2016). Iran Guide. Retrieved from <http://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/iran-guide>.

The family is the most important element of Iranian culture and society and is defined in the Constitution as the fundamental unit of society. Kinship and family constitute a tightly linked network, in which the highest priority is assigned to the welfare of the members rather than to individual goals. People rely on family connections for influence, power, and security. In traditional Iranian families the individual’s life is dominated by the family and family relationships.

The typical Iranian family household is extended to include grandparents. The extended family has traditionally been the basic social unit. In rural areas the maintenance of this pattern is crucial for survival in hard times and so is generally preserved. In urban areas the significance of the extended family has diminished because of the geographical dispersion of the extended family and differences in status and material wealth.

Marriage in Iran is traditionally viewed not only as the only socially acceptable pathway to sexual relations but also as a permanent commitment, bonding not only the married couples but also their families. Procreation is a primary goal of marriage, and infertility is seen by some as an adequate justification for divorce.

Arranged marriage is common in Iran, especially in rural areas. A delegation of parents and elders from the man’s side are usually responsible for the *khastegari*, the formal marriage proposal. During their first meeting, the two families discuss the marital contract, in which matters such as the size of the dowry are settled.

Among upper- and middle-class urban families, the[*khastegari*](https://sahbaap.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/how-a-couple-get-married-in-iran/) still plays an important role, but the initiative lies with the couple intending to marry. Marriages arranged by parents on behalf of their young children are rare.

Polygamy is allowed in Iran. According to [Shiite](https://fanack.com/iran/population/) marriage law, a man may have as many as four wives simultaneously. Polygamy is, however, frowned upon by many in Iran and is rarely practised.

After the [Revolution](https://fanack.com/iran/history-past-to-present/the-islamic-revolution/), the new government adopted a pro-natalist approach. [Family planning](https://fanack.com/iran/population/)was seen as a Western influence, and contraception was no longer promoted. The legal minimum age for marriage was lowered to nine for girls and twelve for boys. After the war, the Iranian leadership revised its perception of family planning. With a ruined economy, job shortages, and overcrowded cities, population growth was seen as detrimental to development.

Thanks to family planning education, the widespread use of contraceptives, and the sharp decline in fertility, family size has declined, and socio-political changes have affected young people’s view of marriage and the structure and functioning of the family.

Although the Islamic regime encourages early marriage (based partly on the disapproval of premarital sex), the average age at first marriage during the period 1976-1996 increased from 19.7 to 22.4 for women, and from 24.1 to 25.6 for men, and divorce rates increased gradually. Divorce is strongly discouraged in Islam and disapproved of in Iranian culture. For women, especially, divorce has far-reaching consequences, because of their usual economic dependence on men and because of social disapproval of divorced women.

‘[Temporary marriage](https://fanack.com/wp-content/uploads/temporary-marriage.pdf)‘ (*siqeh*) is another form of legal cohabitation between men and women. While no duration is specified in permanent marriage, a temporary marriage can last for a specified time. A man (either married or single) and a single woman agree on the period of the relationship and the amount of compensation to be paid to the woman.

In *siqeh*, the wife is not entitled to any financial support or inheritance from the husband. Proponents of *siqeh* argue that it curbs free sex, controls prostitution, and supports divorced or widowed women, but *siqeh* is very unpopular with many Iranians, particularly those of the middle and upper classes. Opponents argue that siqeh is, in fact, a form of legalized prostitution.

**[Family](https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/iranian-culture)**

In Iran, people generally feel able to relax their moral codes of behaviour and reveal the private side of their life when surrounded by people from their inner circle. These are primarily their family members and close friends. One usually turns immediately to family for assistance and may tell their problems and issues only to their family members. Individuals then keep any information surrounding troubles within the family circle away from public knowledge. This ensures that the household’s name is not implicated with trouble and their honour is protected. Families are also usually the basis for people’s social and business network. These relationships can provide support, guidance, employment opportunities or help navigating bureaucracies.

Being a collectivist society, people in Iran show very strong loyalty to their family. The interests of the family can supersede the needs of a single individual. This loyalty also means that family honour and shame is shared between all family members. All people may gain the prestige of a family’s success or bear the responsibility for a family’s dishonour. This being said, most families seek to encourage individuals to be independent. Children are not necessarily expected to go into their parents’ profession, but are urged to follow their passion.

Couples tend to only have one to two children. While the nuclear family is modestly sized, close relationships with the extended family mean people’s family networks are sometimes quite large. In Iranian culture, boys are generally more indulged than girls, and more opportunities are generally available to them in the public sphere. They are also sometimes taught early that the protection of family honour also resides with them. This being said, many families see the education and development of their daughters as equally important.

Family roles and dynamics vary significantly between those households that have progressive understandings of women’s rights, authority and privacy and those that maintain traditional values. Generally, families with higher educations will be more open-minded regarding the mother’s and father’s contribution to the household dynamic. Across most households, elders are deeply respected and cared for. When an elder family member’s husband or wife dies, they will usually move into the house of one of their children.

**Separation of Genders**

Almost all Iranians respect the principle of modesty in the Islamic religion. According to the scripture, there should be a ‘partition’ (‘*hijab*’) between men and women that are not related (‘*non-mahram*’). As such, women are expected to cover up anything that could be considered an erotic provocateur to avoid unwanted public attention – i.e. her figure and her hair. Iranian women have traditionally been some of the most liberal in their interpretation of the hijab, often wearing a ‘*shayla*’ significantly looser than what is customary in most other Muslim cultures.

This changed as the Islamic Republic legally enforced the separation of genders and placed extreme restrictions on women. Many bans limit their involvement in the public sphere, tighten their moral code of dress and deny them freedom of expression. For example, it is illegal for a woman to ride a bicycle in public. Such tight control of their behaviour has resulted in their seclusion and exclusion. Some citizens are challenging the government through acts of civil resistance (knowingly breaking the law) because the restrictions are much more authoritarian and paternalistic than what many Iranians desire and believe is true to Islam.

Mixing of males and females only really occurs within families or closely knit circles of friends. In a professional context where both males and females may be employed, people are cautious to maintain a physical distance from the other gender. Almost all Iranian schools are segregated.

Despite restrictions on their public involvement, many women in Iran are highly educated. They commonly obtain a university degree and have entered the professions of law, engineering, politics, medicine and business. According to Nation Master, females made up over 60% of the overall Iranian student body in 2012. However, as men dominate the public sphere and hold more decision-making power, women’s authority is mostly limited to the domestic space. Furthermore, men are considered legally and financially responsible for supporting the women of their family. This means women commonly get passed over for jobs, earn less and receive lower allowances as it is expected that their male family member will support them. Those who are employed usually do desktop-based office work and also rarely get the same management opportunities.

Ultimately, a woman’s independence and freedom to make choices for herself (i.e. to work, get an education, marry, divorce, bear children or not) varies significantly depending on the attitude of her husband or closest male relative. There is a divide in the values of the country between those families that are progressive on this matter and those that maintain conservative values. Broadly, one could make the distinction that the educated of society are more liberal whilst those in rural areas are generally more conservative. Most Iranian expats living in Australia are likely to have a more progressive understanding of women’s rights as many arrive fleeing the harsh policies of the Iranian government.

**Marriage and Dating**

The dynamics of relationships are significantly shaped by the reality of which activities Iranians feel safe doing in public. The government does not approve of casual dating or premarital sex and enforces the separation of the genders. Therefore, if Iranians go out with their girlfriend or boyfriend in public, they run the risk of being berated, reported on or even detained. While this is statistically unlikely to happen, it is a consideration that affects behaviour. Even Iranians that leave the house as husband and wife can draw negative attention. From this is can be appreciated that, while people do date ‘casually’, most casual relationships are approached particularly earnestly as there is a certain risk involved.

Love is the ultimate imperative for Iranians, reflected in the rich language of Persian poems and literature in which hopeless romantics search for the ‘true’ and ‘pure’ love. Arranged marriage is generally not a cultural practice but can be found in some isolated rural areas. Nevertheless, many parents suggest partners to their children, who then may or may not agree with their recommendation.

Dating practices vary significantly between regions, and are impacted by attitudes and education. Previously, people usually only dated after high school; however, it is becoming common for teenagers to do so. Generally, young adults hide the existence of their girlfriend or boyfriend from their parents (especially the father) until they have ascertained that their relationship will lead to marriage. This is usually to protect conservative parents from worrying. Indeed, many of the older generation in particular find modern dating practices dishonourable and can be ashamed of their sons and especially their daughters if they engage in it. There remains a great deal of protection around girls in this regard. If a father or brother knows of a girl’s boyfriend, they may pretend that they are oblivious to that knowledge.

**[Core Concepts](https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/iranian-culture)**

* Intellect
* Politeness
* Achievement
* Technology
* Respect
* Theology
* Dignity
* Humbleness

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a Middle Eastern nation located at the crossroads between Arab Asia and Central Asia. While it borders seven different countries, the Iranian people do not seem to affiliate themselves with the Arab world; nor do they share much commonality with those in South/Central Asia. Rather, the distinctive Persian identity engenders a strong sense of pride and belonging among its people. Indeed, one commonly hears Iranians calling themselves “Persian1”, as they often prefer to be associated with the prestige of the historical empire. The Iranian culture and people have a history of being one of the most progressive in the Middle East. Iranians can often recount the country’s legacy and heritage in great detail.

**Modernity and Education**

One of the most notable characteristics of the Iranian people is their thirst for knowledge. In first interactions with a stranger on the street, one may find that a taxi driver is, in fact, an ‘expert’ on architecture, or a colleague can explain the complex history of countries they’ve never visited. Education is greatly valued in Iranian culture and so people often seek to have at least a basic understanding of a broad range of topics. Many people study for a higher education or post-graduate degree as strong respect is shown to those who have proof of expertise. All leaders are expected to have a high level of academic achievement or theological education.

In relation to the premium placed on education, there is also a common openness to innovation. Indeed, general society embraces science and development, and there seems to be a cultural consensus that Islamic principles do not necessarily contradict technological and scientific progress. Iran has been swift and forthcoming in adopting and bringing forward new ideas. One can notice it in the institutions dedicated to technology and medical sciences, but also in the general population’s remarkable mobilisation of multiple social networks.

**Islam in Iran**

Across its history, Iran has continuously pursued modernisation whilst looking to maintain its spiritual integrity. It has had a Muslim majority population for centuries and so the culture is deeply characterised by its strong Islamic influence. The Iranian people have a record of practising quite a progressive form of Shi’a Islam. The cultural interpretation of the religion has been traditionally open-minded, making allowances for liberal behaviour and improvements in women’s rights. People generally had more the freedom of choice and expression over, for example, whether they wished to pray or wear a ‘*hijab*’.

However, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution overthrew the secular monarchy and the Islamic Republic was subsequently established. This system of theocratic governance remains in place today. Under it, Islamic theologians and ‘*mullahs*’ constitute the highest ranks of leadership. They ensure civil law and court decisions abide by the principles of Islam, and are generally highly conservative. Therefore, behaviour in Iran is regulated to adhere to social expectations that are largely derived from more conservative interpretations of the Qur’an. This religious governance directly affects the public, political, economic and legal aspects of people's lives. Today, the conservative interpretations of Islam have become a major social force and dictate much of what Iranians can and cannot do. Iranians regularly break the Islamic civil rules; however, this always carries a risk of arrest. Speaking up or publishing material that questions the current system can also be interpreted as anti-Islamic.

Many Iranians have misgivings about the politicisation of Islam. Much of the population seeks a return to a more liberal society; older generations can often remember the time when public life was more easy-going and younger generations, exposed to alternative ideas through the internet and overseas education, yearn for a lifting of restrictions on individual behaviour.

Despite the firmly entrenched reach of the Islamic Republic, Iranians generally discuss politics with vigour. Indeed, subjects that Australians often avoid (politics and religion) are not necessarily taboo conversations among friends and colleagues in Iran. Many people use humour to criticise their leaders through ‘doublespeak’, and share their theories of scandal and corruption with strangers. Nevertheless, while politics is commonly ridiculed, most people are very reluctant to criticise Islam both from a social standpoint and a moral/theological perspective. It is important for non-Muslims to understand that many Iranians generally recognise the *government* as the source of their complaint, not Islam.

**Surface and Underground Culture**

Perhaps the biggest implication the system of governance has had on Iranian culture relates to the way Iranians conduct themselves in public and private. For many Iranians, there is a personal contradiction between what they ‘want’ to do and what they are ‘permitted’ to do. Therefore, it is very important to distinguish the political culture and values of the government from the culture and values of the Iranian people.

At first glance, public behaviour in Iran is generally conservative. It is uncommon for people to overtly express themselves or publicly identify with unconventional subcultures or hobbies. However, many Iranians refer to this as the ‘surface’ culture in which people act as their ‘*zaaher*’ (“visible”) identity. In public, people behave in the way that will benefit them (i.e. keeping to the rules to avoid attracting the attention of government operatives). However, individuals may not necessarily believe in these actions and instead fake them for the sake of their safety and reputation.

More recently, Iranians have been referring to themselves as living ‘underground’. ‘Underground’, people behave the way they truly believe, often relaxing their moral codes of behaviour. This is the way they act at home or with their inner circle, where they can reveal their ‘*baaten*’ (“inside” or “true”) identity without risk of arrest. For example, at one point, all music and dancing were banned and Iranians had to carefully hide the activities they loved ‘underground’.

**Pride and Humbleness**

Behaviour in Iran is also noticeably influenced by people’s perceptions of pride and dignity. This is based on the traditional idea that people should protect their personal and family honour by giving a public impression of dignity and integrity. As people don’t want to risk doing something shameful, they generally adhere to social expectations. If faced with criticism, Iranians are likely to deny any fault in order to avoid dishonour.

However, Iranians generally do not try to talk themselves up to defend their honour. While prestige can be gained through achievement, boasting of it is seen as pretentious and can draw quick dislike and denigration. Instead, people are expected to self-deprecate their success. The more humility a person shows, the less likely they are to be criticised. By the likes of tall poppy syndrome, people are expected to be humble and unassuming about themselves. Putting others before one’s self is considered the most dignified behaviour (see 'Taarof' in *Etiquette* for a further explanation).

It is worth noting that the expectations regarding what is ‘honourable’ and ‘shameful’ can vary significantly between different people, family backgrounds and social attitudes. For example, the younger Iranian generation generally do not feel the need to stringently apply the honour code and will often hide certain ‘shameful’ actions they consider reasonable from the older generations, who might be deeply offended by such behaviours.

**Social Hierarchies**

Iranian culture remains relatively class conscious. Significant class differences were exacerbated through periods of recent economic hardship and instability. While some households may employ servants, others may struggle to put food on the table. Nevertheless, much of the population shares the benefits of the middle class. Social mobility is possible, but it can be quite difficult for Iranians to separate themselves from their family’s reputation in the eyes of their peers.

Largely, one’s family is the biggest social indicator of status. Education, wealth and ethnic or tribal associations can all affect a person’s social standing. It is also considered quite prestigious to be able to trace one’s heritage back for centuries. In recent decades, access to political power has become one of the biggest social advantages and indications of privilege. Those families that have connections with the government are sometimes afforded latitude to deviate from strict rules, or they may receive more lenient consequences for their actions. Religious association also has powerful leverage in society. Someone who is a theologian is presumed to have the moral high ground and power in decision-making, gaining them a lot of respect.

**Diversity**

It should not be assumed that all Iranians share the same language, cultural, religious or political beliefs. There is a huge variation in social codes, behaviours and beliefs between different regions of Iran. One will find different cities have varying reputations from one another, whilst rural areas can have almost entirely different traditions and values. Furthermore, ethnic minorities tend to have distinctive forms of social organisation that are sometimes more collectivistic.

In recent years, there has been reasonably little disagreement between ethnicities in Iran – which is significant considering the diversity. Most Iranians seem to be unified across ethnic divides. Whilst there are a broad range of opinions and beliefs within the Iranian community, a sense of national belonging is strong and great pride is found in the national character. Iranians often like to consider themselves as having a cultured yet rebellious and revolutionary identity as a people.

**[Religion](https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/iranian-culture)**

It is estimated that 99.4% (July 2016 est.) of the Iranian population identify as Muslim – the majority being Shi’a (also known as Shi’ite) Muslims. Iran is the only Muslim country to declare itself officially Shi’ite. A minority of around 5-10% of the population identify as Sunni Muslims. Within the Shi’a branch of Islam, there are different sects. The biggest is the Twelver Shi’a sect; however, some Iranians are also Ismaili Shi’a Muslims.

**Islam in Iran**

Iran has a history of practising quite a modern form of Islam. Before the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iranians had a choice as to whether they were religious or not. Though the vast majority had a deep faith, it was not essential to publicly exhibit piety, and people were not necessarily judged for liberal behaviours. For example, women were allowed not to wear the hijab if they wanted and some people chose not to pray.

The secular nature of society has all but disappeared since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Religion has been highly politicized as the government looks to ensure that the private, public, legal and economic aspects of Iranians’ lives operate in accordance to Islamic principles. Many rules restrict citizens’ behaviour, requiring them to abide by conservative interpretations of the Qur’an. There are also laws and judicial rulings that punish people for doing something that could be interpreted as anti-Islamic or in conflict with Islamic principles – regardless of whether they are Muslims themselves or not. A council of religious leaders has ultimate say over the democratically elected governmental system, and all members of the judiciary must be Shi’a Muslims.

Despite the current political domination of religion, strong evidence suggests not all Iranians are strictly obedient to Islamic code. Data from the World Values Survey indicates religious observance (i.e. at mosques) is very low and only an estimated 2% of the population attend Friday congregational prayers. Those who are devout Muslims often belong to the older generation.

In brief, most Iranians believe in*Allah* (God) and the tenets of Islam. However, the politicisation of Islam has created a backlash against religion from younger Iranian citizens in particular. Some of the new generation are following more Western philosophical schools of thought and/or atheism; however, they rarely make this public knowledge. Meanwhile, those Iranians who do hold strong religious beliefs have tended to restrict their observance to their homes in order to keep their faith a personal, sacred matter1.

An Iranian who is dedicated to the dominant role of Islam in politics and society may grow their beard quite long to indicate their religious association or have a voluntary public involvement with the mosques. People can also pursue an education in Islamic theology and sacred law to become a ‘*mullah*’ (cleric). Islamic theologians are often presumed to have the moral high ground and expertise in decision-making. Under the current system of governance, religious affiliation is also correlated with political power.

**Other Religions**

The constitution states that non-Muslims should be treated in accordance “with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity”,respecting their human rights. It also legally recognises Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians as free to perform their religion. There are 5 parliamentary seats reserved for these minorities.

Broadly, religious minorities will not face day-to-day discrimination for their faith but will be significantly disadvantaged structurally (for example, in the justice system or employment and education opportunities). They generally have to be very careful not to advertise their faith as the political authority of Islam has restricted freedom of religion. For example, conversion to Christianity is apostasy, punishable by death. Many members of religious minorities have faced persecution, intimidation and harassment for their beliefs; they commonly are asked to supply the government with the names of their churches’ members.

**Bahá’í**

The Bahá’í faith is a significant minority religion in Iran. It originated in Iran less than 200 years ago; however, it is not a branch of Islam. The Bahá’í faith believes in a unity of humanity and religion and the teachings of its founder: Baha’u’lalh. It maintains that all religions are integrated under the same divine source and all messengers from God (i.e. Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad and Baha’u’lalh) come from that same almighty. Bahá’ís ultimately believe in the oneness of religion, unification of humanity (including the genders) and a global society in which prejudice and differences of social status must be abandoned. Many generally feel it is a duty of their faith to encourage others to join their religion as well as be sympathetic and well-wishing.

The Shi’a clergy (as well as other Iranians) have continued to regard Bahá’ís as heretics from Islam. Some extreme Muslims believe Bahá’ís are morally dirty and that touching them can taint you. The Islamic Republic does not recognise Bahá’ís as a religious minority in the constitution, and so the sect has been officially marginalised and disempowered. Consequently, Bahá’ís have encountered much prejudice and have sometimes been the object of persecution.

**[Naming](https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/iranian-culture)**

* It is not customary for Iranians to have a middle name. Instead, they may have two first names: [first personal name] [optional second personal name] [surname].
* Naming is patrilineal with children taking their father’s last name. However, women do not have to change their last name to their husband’s at marriage. They may add it onto their own with a hyphen if they choose.
* One’s name can reflect their family’s background. People who have a name that has strong religious association (i.e. Mohammed, Ataollah) may to come from a conservative household. Alternatively, those with classic Persian names might have more progressive parents. However, many religiously-based names are popular throughout society. For example, Ali (for boys) and Fatemeh (for girls) are very common.
* Some common Persian personal names are Dariush, Koorush, Abtin, Kamran and Arash for men. Elnaz, Shirin, Sara, Nooshin, Mehri and Laleh are common for women.

Many names have a meaning. For

* example, Behrooz (boy’s name) means ‘better day’, while Bahar (girl’s name) means ‘season of Spring’.
* Persian names are often based on inspiring characters of old Persian literature. The person may be thought to carry the reputation of that character. For example, they might have a connotation of bravery if they are named after a hero, or thoughtfulness if named after an intellectual.
* Many modern surnames reflect a family’s local city or region. For example, someone with the last name TEHRANI is likely to have heritage in Tehran.
* Other surnames may have a suffix that means ‘son of’. HASSANZADEH indicates ‘son of Hassan’. This kind of name structure may be hyphenated or separated as either HASSAN-ZADEN or HASSAN ZADEN. However, both words should still be considered part of the last name.
* A title of ‘*Sheikh*’ indicates a person is a head of a religious Islamic group, however this is not very common in modern day Iran.
* The title ‘*Haj*’ indicates a person has completed their pilgrimage to Mecca.