

# Embark on journey through history of Iran's tobacco industry

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## INTERVIEW INTERVIEW

Tobacco and cigarettes may appear to be straightforward subjects at first glance, but in Iran, they hold a historical, eventful, and even peculiar narrative. Those versed in Iran's history are likely familiar with the Tobacco Protest, a significant event that arose in opposition to the granting of the tobacco and cigarette trade monopoly to foreigners by Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831-1896 CE). This protest is renowned as the initial and most extensive movement against tyranny and colonialism in Iran.

The peak of this popular uprising came after Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi issued a historic fatwa (a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority), calling for a boycott of tobacco. This fatwa ultimately led to the annulment of the monopoly that had been bestowed upon the British for fifty years. The significance of this uprising underscores the economic implications of the issue and its impacts on the political and social spheres in Iran.

Tobacco and cigarettes were significant contributors to the livelihoods and incomes of the people during the Qajar and Pahlavi era in Iran. English historian Watson noted in the nineteenth century that during the rule of Mohammad Shah and Naser al-Din Shah, the population of Iran was estimated to be between five to 10 million, with around 200,000 individuals involved in the cultivation, purchase, and sale of tobacco. The cultivation and trade of tobacco and cigarettes in Iran thrived to the extent that a road named the Tobacco Road was established in the country, and specialized railway lines were constructed for their transportation. These factors collectively fueled the rapid expansion of the Iran Tobacco Company (ITC), recognized as the largest and oldest producer of cigarettes and tobacco in the Middle East.



### ITC building

The building of this company, boasting a century-old history, was erected outside the old gate of Tehran, famously known as Qazvin Gate (now Qazvin Square). It remains intact, housing the company's ongoing production operations. Given the historical importance of tobacco and cigarettes in Iran, the Tobacco Museum was inaugurated within the premises in 2018. Its purpose is to curate a collection of relevant documents and antiquities.

Zahra Sheybani, the director of the museum, offered some insights to Iran Daily regarding the founding of the museum and the items on display.

She said, "The idea of establishing the museum took shape in the early 2010s. We initially intended to collect several documents and objects that were in the hands of company personnel or various individuals. On the other hand, tobacco and cigarettes played an important role in various social, economic, and other aspects in Iran, for example, during the Qajar period, a large portion of agricultural lands was allocated to tobacco cultivation, and we even had special railway lines for the transportation of tobacco."

She noted that eventually, the museum was established, and currently, 3,000 documents collected since 1934, including some historical documents, the company's administrative correspondence, and files related to personnel and former company heads, are on display in this museum. Furthermore, 300 valuable antique items from the 1940s to the 1970s have been gathered in this museum.

The building of the company is listed as a national heritage. It was constructed in 1289 by the Czech company SKODA and was inaugurated in 1937 by Reza Khan, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. His photo, along with his son Mohammad Reza, is present in the museum while as-

cending the stairs of this building and inaugurating it.

"However, the building is registered under a German name because at that time, Czechoslovakia was under German occupation. SKODA, a renowned construction company, also built the central building of Bank Melli Iran at the time. SKODA has undertaken numerous constructions worldwide, and many of the buildings they constructed share similar structures and architecture," she continued.

### Scientific advancement

At the entrance of the museum, a frame containing photos and images of former company executives from the past to the present is installed in rows side by side.

Sheybani pointed to the image of the first managing director of the tobacco company Feridlib Solhdoost and explained that he was the one who first proposed the establishment of the tobacco company. Of Swiss origin, he was nicknamed 'Solhdoost' (meaning peace lover) by the company workers due to Switzerland's neutrality in World War II. This name stuck with him. The establishment of the company and the tobacco monopoly aimed to prevent currency outflow from the country.

"Solhdoost was tasked with inviting foreign experts for this purpose because, in Iran, tobacco cultivation had traditionally been done unscientifically and with low efficiency. Solhdoost hired a person named 'Athanas Zafiroplous,' who was the director of a tobacco research center in Greece, and he, along with 40 other experts, came to Iran in 1934," she added.

Zafiroplous was allowed to purchase land from farmers at any suitable location in the country for tobacco cultivation, on the condition that up to three generations of the original landowners could work on those lands. It was also stipulated that over time, Iranian experts would replace



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