

# Long history of efforts to remove Iranian, Persian traces in Mideast

## Neighbors cannot solely meet Iran's economic needs



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**S P E E C H**

A panel discussion, titled “Iran, Its Regional Environment, and Emerging Deals: The Essence of Iran, Foreign Relations, and Regional Policy,” was held on Sunday, October 26, at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies, an initiative by the Iran Studies Group. The session shed light on several historical points concerning Iran’s surrounding environment.

Speakers included Kourosh Ahmadi, Iran’s former diplomat at the United Nations and an international affairs analyst, Abbas Akhouni, former Iranian minister of Roads and Urban Development, and Kaveh Bayat, writer and translator. They laid out their perspectives on the key priorities of Iran’s foreign policy. What follows is a translation of Kourosh Ahmadi’s detailed address.

It is wise to kick off any discussion about Iran with an examination of geopolitics — the product of interaction among physical geography, human geography, and politics. While physical geography remains unchanged, human geography and politics are constantly evolving, which means a country’s or a region’s geopolitics is bound to shift with the tides. In other words, a state’s geopolitical profile is never carved in stone. It changes in line with developments in human geography, politics, and the dynamics of power surrounding it.

By the late 18th century, Iran underwent a sweeping geopolitical transformation. Up to that point, its geopolitical boundaries had been confined to a zone where four main powers — the Ottoman Empire, the Uzbeks, the Mughal Empire of India, and Iran — either rubbed shoulders or locked horns at any time. Since the early 16th century (specifically 1507 to 1515), the Portuguese had moved into the region, though their presence was mostly limited to Iranian islands and ports. As a global maritime hegemon, they had taken control of southern Iranian waters. Yet, Europe’s powers largely failed to break into the Iranian heartland or its surrounding lands. Later came the Dutch, whose presence was mainly maritime and trade-oriented, though they occasionally resorted to military force.

### Risks of overlooking cultural Iran

Then, by the late 18th century, the British stepped onto the scene, staking a claim both within Iran through political influence and on the Indian subcontinent through both physical and colonial presence. During this period, Russia was also active. Thus, by the end of the 18th century, two European imperial powers had set their sights on the region. The arrival of these two powers threw the region’s geopolitics into disarray — a development unseen before. Previously, four regional powers had jockeyed for position, but with these two European, militarized, and modernized empires muscling in, the balance went out the window. Their intervention in Iran and Iran’s periphery set the stage for sweeping changes in both. The British, in particular, started meddling in the cultural sphere of what was then known as Greater Iran.

With the consolidation of the East India Company’s position in India, the process of “de-Persianization” got underway. Persian language and culture had been integral elements of Iran’s wider cultural sphere. Yet, this process was met with hostility from the British, who in 1837 banned Persian — the administrative, royal,



The photo shows damaged bas-reliefs in Persepolis, central Iran.  
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and judicial language of India — and swapped it out for English. By that time, the Persian language had been deeply rooted in the subcontinent for nearly eight centuries, ever since it had made its way in under Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, rising to its peak of refinement when they started the de-Persianization. Immigrants from mainland Iran — architects, craftsmen, and others — had long been flocking to India. Many of these migrations came about in the 18th century, after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722, when Iran was thrown into turmoil.

This chaos was stoked by uprisings largely fueled by religious minorities who had had enough of Safavid court-imposed pressures. Sunnis, Zoroastrians, and others rose up against the Safavids. As a result, numerous artists, poets, architects, and other professionals packed their bags and headed for India.

The outcome was a flourishing of Iranian art, literature, and culture there. Another hallmark of this “greater Iran” territory was its decentralization, especially after the fall of the Safavids and the weakening of the Mughals. Various cities, large and small, held on to nominal autonomy. Persian culture and language took much better root in such environments and managed to endure. But with the arrival of the Russians from the north and the British from the south and east (through the Persian Gulf and India, respectively), these imperial forces largely destroyed the autonomy of those semi-autonomous local entities. For Britain, the Persian language and Iranian culture stood in the way of its dominance.

### Impact of modern notion of borders on cultural Iran

To dig a bit deeper, when Britain entered the picture as a global power, it came face-to-face with Iran — the only real regional power both before and after that

era. That regional power, however, had to be kept in check if Britain wanted to tighten its grip on the area. Consequently, semi-autonomous regions in Central Asia gradually fell under Russian rule, while the British worked to undermine Persian cultural and artistic presence concurrently with expanding their political influence in Iran and its surrounding. The idea of “Iran” and its historical levers and networks of influence were thus slowly stripped of their strength.

Iran’s reach gradually came under pressure from two major powers — Russia and Britain — both militarily and politically. In the Iran–Russia wars, some parts of the Caucasian territories were lost. Iran also clashed with Britain twice in attempts to reassert control over Herat. Between 1838 and 1854, several skirmishes broke out as Britain sought to block Iran’s expanding influence and efforts to reclaim Herat, launching attacks from the south and pressuring the Qajar court.

At the same time, the British turned their eyes to the Persian Gulf, moving to take over Iranian ports and islands. As a maritime power, Britain needed to keep a foothold along key sea routes, making control of Iranian coasts, ports, and especially islands crucial. This policy kicked off with Bahrain and eventually spilled over to the three disputed Iranian islands — an episode well-known today that can be analyzed under the mentioned framework.

Thus, Iran found itself squeezed militarily and politically. Beyond that, in cultural, literary, and artistic realms, the British made no secret of their efforts to wipe out Iran’s historical influence in India. In the north, the same playbook was followed in Central Asia, where Iran’s political, military, and cultural influence was systematically reined in.

Subsequently, with the treaties of Turkmenchay and Golestan, Iran’s frontiers in Central Asia and along the Aras River were formally drawn up. This period

marked the start of Iran’s entry into the age of its defined, modern borders. Before that, Iran had only “frontiers,” zones where, for example, Iran, the Ottomans, and local powers all shared space, and clear delineation was rare.

The involvement of Russia and Britain, coupled with the introduction of new concepts of international law, led to the gradual drawing of borders. As a result, a deep divide opened up between “cultural Iran” within its new political borders and “cultural Iran” beyond them, in regions such as Afghanistan and Central Asia. From the 19th century onward, this fragmentation grew increasingly visible.

To the west, a similar process unfolded. The Ottoman Empire, too, fell partly under the umbrella of Iran’s cultural sphere. Four to five centuries before Ottoman domination of Western Asia — which began in the late 13th and 14th centuries — Persian culture and language had already seeped in. The Ottoman sultans were familiar with Irani-

an culture; Some were Persian speakers, poets, and avid readers of the Shahnameh. Even formal correspondence between Shah Ismail Safavid and Ottoman monarchs was carried out in Persian.

For example, Sultan Suleiman left behind a Persian divan of poetry, which speaks volumes about how Persian was, at that time, the administrative, judicial, and literary language of the Ottomans. This trend carried on for roughly three to four centuries, lasting until the late 17th century — around the 1690s. During this period, the Ottomans set out to start de-Persianization, swapping out Persian with Turkish in the court, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary, and rolling out extensive language reforms in Turkish.

Nevertheless, the Persian language managed to hold onto its cultural influence throughout the Ottoman realm and its surroundings — even across Eastern Europe. In the Arab world, Iraq was much the same; Culturally, religiously, and through Shia Islam, Iraq was closely tied to Iran, with Persian language and culture making significant inroads. The majority of Iraqis were Shias, and because of pilgrimage and religious exchanges, the two countries were constantly coming and going, maintaining cultural ties. Iraq actually stood as a kind of buffer and shared backyard between Iran and the Ottomans, with both powers vying for the upper hand in Iraq. At times, Iraq fell under the sway of Iran, while at other times, it came under Ottoman domination. Persian language and

The Mughal emperor Shah Alam (sitting-G) of present-day India hands a scroll to Robert Clive, the British governor of Bengal.  
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